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AN
ESSAY
ON THE
CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE
OF
THE STAGE
ON MORALS AND HAPPINESS.

BY JOHN STYLES.

“ Shall Truth be silent because Folly frowns ? ”

YOUNG.

SECOND EDITION,
WITH AN APPENDIX.

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ERRATA.

Page 17, for "verecundiusque," read "verecundusque."

Page 20, note, for "no evidence of a thing," read "no evidence of the utility of a thing."

Page 49, for "Miss Baille," read "Miss Baillie."

Page 133, for "Mrs. Moore," read "Mrs. More."

In two or three instances supply inverted commas at the end of quotations.

PREFACE.

WHATEVER different opinions may be entertained, respecting the EXECUTION of the following Work, the Author hopes that, among the friends of morality and religion, there will be but one as to its OBJECT. It may, however, be justly asked, Why is the subject of the Theatre again agitated? Has it not of late especially been amply discussed? That this subject has excited considerable attention must be acknowledged; but it surely will not be seriously urged, that any work has been recently written, which, separate from personal alteration and local circumstances, has any claim to general circula-

tion. In single sermons, and in a well written pamphlet*, strictures on the immorality and dangerous tendency of the Stage have appeared; but there has been no volume of modern publication which is professedly and exclusively devoted to the subject.

A remark in the Eclectic Review, which declared it to be of no small practical interest, induced me to undertake the present Work: with what success I have fulfilled my task the public must decide. I offer no apology for inaccuracy; the general cant of authors, by which they would disarm criticism: as I have always despised it, so I disdain to employ it. Every man who prints should do his best: but if he think to attain perfection, he betrays a weakness which will ensure his disappointment. However, without sup-

* Rev. Rowland Hill's "Warning to Professors."

posing that his production is faultless, an author and his reader are not always agreed as to its merit. It is natural for the one to view his offspring with fondness, to array it in imaginary charms : while the other, feeling no kindred attachment, may contemplate it with frigid indifference, or expose its blemishes with cruel severity. Like the sickly infant, many a literary performance comes into the world to go out of it again ; and stays no longer than to gasp and die. Yet, surely no individual ever wrote for the press, who was himself persuaded, that obloquy would cover him with shame ; or contempt be the reward of his toil.

In the present instance, whatever may be my fate, I have at least this consolation, that I have endeavoured to give “ardour to virtue, and confidence to truth.” In this I may have failed ; but it

has been my object and my aim. Secure in the approbation of my own conscience, and of all good men, I court no other patronage, and I deprecate no censure.

Flattering compliments from a venal pen may soothe the pride of greatness, and there may be "golden reasons" for employing the honeyed accents of praise, to emblazon the generosity, and exalt the taste of some distinguished lord of our creation: but the man who will sacrifice his dignity to his interest, dishonours human nature, and has only to turn **PLAYER** to complete the degradation of his character.

From the severity of hyper-criticism I have nothing to fear: a work possessing inherent merit will make its way in spite of opposition: but if it contain, in its own bosom, the seeds of dissolution, the kindness of friends will prolong its exist-

ence but a little while, and it needs not the officious hand of criticism to dispatch it to an untimely grave.

*Fitzgerald's Cottage, West
Cowes, Isle of Wight.*

J. S.

ADVERTISEMENT

TO THE SECOND EDITION.

The Author has availed himself in this edition of several important extracts from celebrated writers, in confirmation of the general design of his work. He has also subjoined an Appendix, in which the principles and observations contained in the Essay are defended, against the strictures of an article in the fifth volume of the Annual Review. By these additions, the book is considerably enlarged:—whether it is improved, is a question which only a judicious public can decide. At the hands of the Reviewers, as he has never received so the Author does not expect mercy. He has now attacked one of their tribe, and he doubts not that, to avenge the insult, they will literally regard a maxim, which they seldom forget, and which is indeed the secret of all GOOD reviewing, “calumniare fortiter.”

ESSAY ON THE STAGE.

CHAP. I.A BRIEF INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN AND
PROGRESS OF THE STAGE.

THE history of the Theatre from its commencement to the present hour, furnishes us with a melancholy picture of human folly and degeneracy; and, if it be indeed the epitome of man, how hard must be his heart, who, while viewing his species through this medium, does not weep over human nature!

But it is not the origin and progress of the Stage in this view that I now mean to trace; all I intend in this chapter, as introductory to the principal object of my essay, is to inquire—What gave rise to theatrical representation; in what nations the Theatre has been supported and encouraged; and what has been its progress in ancient and modern times.

The Theatre, so injurious, so hostile to true religion, owes its existence to the false religions of Heathenism : its first inventors probably were a superstitious or an interested priesthood.

The religion of the Heathens, as it was a religion of extravagance and falsehood, acquired and retained its influence by pomp and parade---by dazzling the imagination and inflaming the passions. To secure its votaries, it accommodated itself to their appetites and depravity ; and the peace and welfare of society were infinitely more preserved by the civil law, than by the principles of piety, if indeed we may dignify the blind homage of the multitude to their execrable deities by this venerable name. But though their religion did little for the Heathen world, either in promoting their virtue or their happiness, as a potent charm it held them in profound submission ; and perhaps the most powerful spring, the grand talisman, which so completely subdued and retained them, was the theatrical vehicle which conveyed to them the history of their absurd mythology.

The knowledge of their gods and of their divine exploits they received not in the dull uninteresting method of lecture and discourse ; when they were instructed, the fascinating charms of gesture and action rivetted the attention and captivated the soul. But the

tendency of all human things to degeneracy produced what we now understand by the Drama. That which first was solely appropriated to the service of the gods, was soon divested of its exclusive honours, and prostituted to purposes the most ignoble and vile. The disgusting **MIME** and **PANTOMIME** attracted the attention of the multitude; to these succeeded **COMEDY**, more regular perhaps, but little superior: and at length **TRAGEDY**, stately in its manner, disciplined in its form, enriched with sentiment, and adorned by the graces, gradually arose to its distinguished eminence.

Thus did the Theatre rear its head under the reign of Paganism in ancient times; and the modern history of its origin in Europe, among Christians, since the establishment of Christianity, traces it to religion.—In the earliest and best ages of the church, the Theatre was regarded with abhorrence by the Christian Fathers; and it was thought a crime little less than apostasy, for a Christian to be a spectator at any of the public shows. But, when Christianity was transformed and united to a refined system of worldly policy, the degraded priesthood, after the example of their Pagan ancestors, in order to render their religion palatable, and also to counteract the influence of the Troubadours and Minstrels (of whom they became exceedingly

jealous), annexed to it Heathen pomp and ceremony; they actually made the events of sacred history the subjects of dramatic representation; and the mock disciples of the Holy Jesus were disciplined into a theatrical corps, who vainly attempted to conceal their avarice and hypocrisy under the transparent garb of grimace and show. Thus we read of the "holy brotherhood of the crucifixion," a tribe of vagrant robbers, who, like locusts, overran those countries which groaned beneath the Papal yoke. These were instrumental in sowing the seeds of the Drama, which have issued in those fruits, fair in appearance, "like that which grew in paradise," but which are in reality the produce of that grove, which deceived the arch deceiver, when with hate-fullest disrelish he

——— " writh'd his jaws,
With soot and cinders fill'd."

MILTON.

Among the most distinguished countries which supported and cherished the Stage, before the diffusion of Christianity, we may reckon Greece and Rome; indeed in this division we include the then civilized world. Athens claims the pre-eminence, and was the first city in which was established a regular theatre. The Athenian stage may be considered as the parent stock; from thence it branched off as far as Rome, till it

became at last the elegant and favourite amusement, wherever poetry was admired and luxury enjoyed.

In modern times, Italy, France, Germany, and England have laboured to attain theatrical eminence—they have each produced favourite dramatic writers, and each boasts the unrivalled excellence of its performers.

The progress of the Stage among the ancients and moderns has been various. By progress, I do not mean its improvement as an art, but its gradual advancement in favour and importance in the estimation of mankind. At Athens it was always cherished with enthusiasm by the people, and a passion for the theatre became a national characteristic. The Athenians, seized with a theatrical phrensy, almost suspended the common occupations of life, to enjoy the amusements of the Stage. Dramatic writers among them were men of the highest consideration:—in their annals, legislators and statesmen appear a sort of inferior beings, when brought in competition with Aristophanes and Menander, with Euripides and Sophocles.

Among the Romans, for a series of years, the dramatic art was little cultivated. At the time of its first introduction, the rigid features of the old Roman character were strongly visible; but as these wore away, the Stage advanced with

rapid progress, extended more widely its influence, and became, as at Athens, the fashionable resort of the idle, the dissolute, and the gay.

The history of the Stage is much more distinctly marked in modern times, and its steps more easily traced. The Italians have been remarkable for their Dramatic taste, for the number of their theatres, and the talents of their performers. The French have devoted themselves with enthusiasm to the pleasures of the stage; and the horrors of the revolution, instead of checking seemed to increase their rage for this destructive amusement. The number of public theatres at Paris is almost incredible. Germany has astonished its neighbours by the multitude, variety, and immorality of its dramatic compositions, the fatal poison of which has spread its baneful influence through all Europe, and has even infected the New World. England is rapidly following the example of surrounding nations; and that she has not exceeded them is only to be attributed to the spirit of her laws, and the vigilance of her government.

But in spite of these it is a melancholy fact, that a rage for theatrical pleasures awfully characterizes our age and country. Not contented with the principal theatres in the metropolis—with the Opera, with Covent Garden, and Drury Lane, we have our summer theatres in abund-

ance; and it is so contrived, that, for a considerable period, they are all open at the same time. In addition to these, we have our private theatricals, and our school exhibitions. The fashionable world must have theatres of its own; and inspired with a laudable ambition, they mix with players that they may attain the proud distinction of histrionic fame. Our very children are also instructed to consider the Stage as the principal source of amusement.—Boys and girls must be forced to an unnatural maturity in this hot-bed of the passions: they are not only taken to the theatre, but at school they must become actors and actresses. To excel in the art of playing is now considered a genteel accomplishment. And a theatrical spirit is not confined to the higher classes of society; in the lower walks of life, and particularly in the metropolis, I am informed, there are rooms hired on purpose for theatrical representation:—

“ Whither the unwash’d artizan repairs,”

to tear a passion to tatters, to rave in Lear, or to whine in Romeo. In these private exhibitions, merchant’s clerks, mechanics, and apprentices acquire habits fatal to the interests of sobriety and happiness. The imaginary prince and hero soon feels a sort of real dignity, which entirely unfits him for the discharge of those important

duties which are inseparable from his condition in life.

Provincial theatres have also alarmingly increased. In almost every country town we have now a play-house, which is occasionally visited by some strolling company, who are generally the very offal of society, the vagrant apostles of indecency and immorality, whose business is to spread idleness and dissipation in every place where they are permitted to open their commission. Poor, because they disdain the honourable occupations of life, they submit to any meanness, and mix with the very lowest of the people, that they may obtain suffrage and support. The law, indeed, considers them as vagabonds, and has laid upon them some restraint; but, unfortunately, it has left the exercise of this restraint to the discretion of justices of the peace, when it ought to be invariable in its operation, and universal in its extent. The mean compliances and wretched expedients, to which these poor creatures resort to gain a livelihood of infamy, is thus humourously described by the satirist:—

“ The strolling tribe, a despicable race,
Like wand’ring Arabs, shift from place to place ;
Vagrants by law, to justice open laid,
They tremble, of the beadle’s lash afraid ;
And fawning, cringe, for wretched means of life,
To madam may’ress, or his worship’s wife.

The mighty monarch, in theatric sack,
 Carries his whole regalia at his back ;
 His royal consort heads the female band,
 And leads the heir-apparent in her hand ;
 The pannier'd ass creeps on with conscious pride,
 Bearing a future prince on either side :
 No choice musicians in this troop are found
 To varnish nonsense with the charms of sound ;
 No swords, no daggers, not one poisoned bowl ;
 No light'ning flashes here, no thunders roll ;
 No guards to swell the monarch's train are shown ;
 The monarch here must be a host alone ;
 No solemn pomp, no slow processions here,
 No Ammon's entry, and no Juliet's bier."

With a very little variation, allowing for the change of times and manners, this description is strictly accurate now. And creatures so vulgar, so poor, so infamous, can do little injury to the well-educated part of the community; they are chiefly dangerous to the industrious poor, who, allured by their buffoonery, relinquish their employments, and injure themselves and families by a frequent and expensive attendance on the ridiculous follies of a barn exhibition; or what is quite as disreputable, a country theatre. It is surprising that men of refinement and education should suffer their taste and judgment to be tortured by the bad acting, and worse speaking of provincial players; and that, without any motive, without even the chance of being

pleased, they should lend their example to encourage the lower orders of society to spend their money and their time at the expense of their morals, and their happiness.

CHAP. II.

AN INQUIRY INTO THE PRINCIPAL CAUSES
WHICH HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE SUCCESS OF THE STAGE.

TO investigate the causes of things, to answer the why and wherefore, with which curiosity accosts us at every step, is the business of philosophy: but it is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the most comprehensive human intellect to seize the link which binds together cause and effect, principle and result. The subject which this chapter is intended to discuss is happily unembarrassed, and within the ken of moderate intelligence.—The causes which have contributed, in ancient and modern times, to raise the Stage to the eminence which it has ever maintained in all countries remarkably civilized, are to be found—in the Dramatic Art itself, simply considered:—in the subjects which have uniformly employed the Dramatic pen;—in the character and moral state of the nations, by which the Drama has been welcomed and encouraged.

The Dramatic Art, simply considered, will

account, in some measure, for the influence of the Stage.

That fiction, like a charm, affects the mind, touches the heart, and interests the passions, is a truth which all acknowledge, which all have felt. A tale whether founded on truth or not, which presents to our view an interesting group of fellow-beings struggling with difficulty, drinking of the cup of sorrow, will draw forth the sympathetic tear. The relation of ludicrous incidents will produce laughter; and the representation of virtue receiving its reward, after numberless misfortunes, excites very lively emotions of joy. By a fiction of the imagination we easily persuade ourselves that all which we read is actually passing before us:—the illusion is, for the time, complete; ideal presence makes us forget ourselves;—we are thrown into a kind of reverie, and feel precisely as if we were eye-witnesses of all that the writer describes.

This is true of fiction in general; but one peculiar species of it interests the feelings far more exquisitely, and rouses emotions and passions in a much more sensible degree, and that is—fiction assuming a Dramatic form. Here, instead of being introduced to characters by description, instead of learning their actions or sufferings from another, we hear them tell their own tale—we are made confidants of their most

secret sentiments, and auditors and spectators of their resolutions, their enterprises, and the happy or unhappy events attending them. Thus it is evident, that in simple Dramatic writing there is something congenial with the frame and constitution of the human mind; and it affords in the hand of a master, when enlisted in the cause of virtue, a refined and exquisite satisfaction*.

It will not then excite surprise, when we consider how wonderfully fiction, in this mode, is calculated to please, that the Stage should have so widely extended its influence; especially when, superadded to this, we consider the subjects which have uniformly employed the Dramatic pen: and these have always been adapted to man as depraved; they have flattered the prejudices of the world, and have often gratified the worst dispositions of the heart.

ANCIENT TRAGEDY is certainly the most unexceptionable part of Dramatic history; but in this a Christian finds enough to make him mourn over the moral degradation of mankind. Pride, ambition, and revenge are prominent features in

* I would here just observe, that Dramatic writing and the Theatre are things essentially different. A Theatre indeed necessarily supposes Dramatic writing; but there may be Dramatic writing without a Theatre:—the establishment of a Stage cannot be subservient to virtue, for reasons which I will hereafter assign.

ancient tragedy; but in this the heathens were consistent with themselves, and inculcated the same lessons at the theatre which they heard in their temples. The Drama was a sort of coadjutor to their religion; for, depraved as they were, they would never have tolerated a theatre which disseminated principles hostile to the established religion; this is an inconsistency peculiar to Christian countries, and Christian legislatures. It was a part of Pagan worship, to deify heroes; and the Theatre was the stage on which heroic actions were represented and applauded.

The aim of tragedy has been, in every age, to rouse, what some have called, the greater passions; that is, those passions which have been the fruitful source of almost all the misery which has deluged the world. Against the indulgence of these, the Pagan religions, as it has been remarked, opposed no counteracting influence. It is not therefore at all surprising, that the Dramatic art, employed on such subjects under such circumstances, should rapidly advance the Stage in public favour. But tragedy is chiefly suited to men of literature, and to those who in understanding are raised above the common level. It is COMEDY, with wit, humour, ridicule, and licentiousness in her train, which has contributed more than any thing to the wide-spreading influ-

ence of a theatrical passion among the middling and lower classes of society. ANCIENT COMEDY was made up of buffoonery and satire; it indulged in a liberty scarcely credible, in exposing to ridicule the most illustrious and powerful persons in the state:—it not only aimed its shafts at folly and knavery, but actually brought fools and knaves upon the Stage, and described them with so much truth and accuracy, that it was impossible to misunderstand who the persons were that became the objects of poetical censure; and generals, magistrates, government, the very gods were abandoned to the poet's satirical vein. Thus, when comedy was represented, Envy enjoyed a malignant feast; fell Discontent received a delicious gratification, and

“Grinn'd horribly a ghastly smile,”

while those who had no spleen to gratify, no hatred to indulge, laughed inconsiderately at a fellow-creature's expense. This sort of comedy was abominably licentious, and was filled with obscenities, “which denote (says Rollin) excessive libertinism in the spectators, and depravity in the poet.” Formed of such materials, the Stage secured the approbation of a depraved world:—what power could impede its success when it became a pander to the lusts of mankind?

MIDDLE COMEDY differed little from the former, except that the poet no longer dared to satirize the great.

The NEW COMEDY, established by Alexander, was confined to private life, and is the model which our modern writers profess to imitate: this too was composed of ridicule and licentiousness. The moderns in this respect have followed their predecessors—"passibus æquis:" and as their professed object is, and must be, to please, they accommodate themselves to public opinion and to public taste; they govern not the audience but the audience governs them. This naturally accounts for the progress which the Stage has made both in former and later times.—But there are other causes which have conspired with those already stated to produce this effect, and these are to be found in the character and moral state of those countries by which the Theatre has been encouraged.—In this view of the Subject, we may denominate the causes of the success and influence of the Stage to have been Civilization advanced beyond its zenith, Wealth, Luxury, and Idleness.

In all ages we must look for the lovers and supporters of the Theatre, not among the nations unsophisticated by the abuses which generally accompany a high degree of civilization, but in those countries where wealth and extensive em-

pire have poured in upon the capital the abundance of luxury.

There is a certain point in civilization, beyond which it contributes not to a nation's prosperity or happiness, and that point is, the utmost limit of refinement consistent with virtue. When once the appearance of virtue is substituted in place of the reality, it may be fairly said, the nation of which it is characteristic is on the decline; and it is a remarkable fact, that the Theatre never becomes a general or a favourite amusement in any country till this is the case. When the sinews of Roman and Athenian virtue were the strongest, the people had neither time nor inclination to regard the diversions of the Stage.—Horace, speaking of the Romans in reference to their indifference to the Theatre, assigns for their conduct the following reasons:

*“ Quo sane populus numerabilis utpote parvus,
Et frugi, castusque verecundiusque coibat.”*

They were few, they were wise, they were religious, and they were modest. While this was their character the Theatre made no progress among them; and I am persuaded there is not a nation under heaven of which this sentence is descriptive, where the Stage would be tolerated, or could possibly arrive at celebrity and general patronage. A high degree of national virtue, an attention to

the duties of social life, and the necessity of industry, have ever militated against this dangerous and destructive amusement.

At first, so jealous were the Romans of its influence, that it was found impossible to build among them a permanent Theatre: the most magnificent structures, which cost immense sums in the erection, were only permitted to stand for a few days. It was not till the Romans and Athenians became emasculated by wealth and by luxury, that they afforded countenance and support to the Stage.

The Roman empire was rapidly on the decline when Nero himself became a buffoon and a comedian; and while the Grecians were relaxing the nerves of their strength by these effeminate amusements for which their luxury and idleness gave them a taste, they were gradually unfolding the gates of their city to Philip of Macedon. Let glory intoxicate, and ease effeminate a people,—let wealth relax industry and furnish the refinements of luxury,—let religion be neglected and its sanctions despised,—and the Theatre will rise to the stature of a colossus, and a nation will fall down and worship the idol of its own creation.

These assertions require not arguments to enforce them; standing on the base of truth I point to the column of history: there I see

national virtue, sobriety, industry, manly vigour strongly contending every inch of ground with the abettors of the stage, till at last overpowered by wealth and its concomitant evils they are constrained to yield.

CHAP. III.

THE EFFECTS PRODUCED BY THE STAGE ON
MORALS AND ON HAPPINESS.

“**B**Y their fruits ye shall know them,” is equally applicable to things as to men; PRACTICAL UTILITY is an argument which refutes a thousand objections against a theory or a system *. If it can be proved that great and important advantages result from any thing, the propriety and expediency of which are called in question, nothing but the most incorrigible obstinacy will persevere in hostility and say, “Hurl it to the ground.”

But some things may be presented to our view in such a questionable shape, that the subtle casuist, availing himself of the ambiguity in which he has involved them, will confound truth and perplex the clearest reasoning on the subject.—It is not always easy to decide the simple question of utility, though that decision might set an agitated subject for ever at rest.

* That is, supposing the question does not involve in it the eternal principles of right: no evidence of a thing essentially evil will change its nature and constitute it good.

The effects of the Stage on MORALS and on HAPPINESS, if clearly pointed out, would, in my opinion, go far towards establishing the conclusion, that it is an evil of awful magnitude, the abolition of which the well-being of society imperiously demands. But even on this ground the Drama is not destitute of advocates; there are not wanting theatrical enthusiasts, who with an overflowing zeal for the cause boldly aver, that the Stage has been a public blessing to the world, "That it must float on public favour, the mirror of a nation's virtue and the enlightened and polished school of a free people."

But not one of its champions has advanced fairly and openly into the field of contest; they have all intrenched themselves in some of those plausible representations with which the Dramatic Art, abstractedly considered, has furnished them. The Stage cannot boast one literary advocate who has viewed it impartially, who has taken its just features and traced its MORAL influence. There is not one in fact who has defended the Stage AS IT IS; a creature of their own imagination, a Stage which never had existence but in the regions of fancy, many have indeed fervidly and successfully eulogized. They have given just such a view of the Theatre as Condorcet and Godwin in their wild and beautiful theories, have given of man, which possess

every thing to make them charming—but truth.

We are not to reason a priori on what delightful effects a perfect theatre, “A baseless fabric of a vision,” might produce; we have nothing to do with those who would lead us on to the utmost verge of possibility, who refer us to some distant golden age when this Leopard will change his spots. The true foundation of all reasoning is knowledge. The great question is, What has the real not an imaginary Theatre actually produced? And the point which is now before us, is not what talents have been called forth by the Drama, what improvement literature and taste have derived from it, but what has been its influence on the MORALS and the HAPPINESS of mankind.

I am willing to allow the Stage all that its warmest friends are disposed to claim on the score of literary refinement and taste. But I am by no means persuaded that these effects might not have been otherwise produced. It is, strictly speaking, but one branch of literature that has received peculiar advantage from the Theatre; and perhaps I may be accused of vandalism, when I declare, that if literary taste and the fine arts connected with the Stage must be purchased at the enormous expence of morals and of happiness, it is our duty to preserve our virtue

let the fate of polite literature be what it may.

I am far from asserting that immorality and Dramatic WRITING are necessarily connected; they clearly are not; for Dramatic writing is perfectly distinct from virtue and from vice, and may be made subservient to either; but I maintain, that immorality and the Theatre have hitherto been inseparable. And I fear not contradiction when I assert, that since the promulgation and establishment of Christianity, the Stage has never been for three months together, what a wise Legislature, concerned for the morals of the people, and consequently for their felicity, could consistently tolerate: and from what is known of human nature, there is no probability of a change. Indeed from the nature and circumstances of a Theatre, which will afterwards be considered, a RADICAL improvement in this respect is impossible. It is fair in arguing against what we disapprove, to state those facts which make the scale of reason preponderate in our favour.

As a prosperous Stage is one of the effects of Luxury, Idleness, and Dissipation, it is marked with the features of its family, and to render their progress more alarming, it lends to its progenitors all its power. Aided by the Theatre, these destroyers of virtue become more and more

successful in the work of death. In the Stage they have a powerful auxiliary, more particularly useful in enlarging the boundaries of their influence. The effeminacy of luxury, its idleness and its vice, are at first confined to the wealthy and the great: and while the body of the people remain uncontaminated, the cause of virtue, comparatively speaking, suffers little. The fruitful parent of vice and misery is that which relaxes the nerve of industry; which transforms the citizen, the tradesman, and the mechanic, into the man of fashion, the loungeur, and the libertine. While dissipation moves in the narrow circle of the exalted few, it is but an excrescence on the body—it affects not the constitution; but when it widens its sphere, and embraces alike the poor and the rich, with the intermediate space between, it is as if the whole mass of blood was infected with deadly poison. And that channel, through which the higher classes of society pour forth their contaminating influence upon the humbler walks of life, whatever it be, is perhaps of all the evils that ever entered the world the most baneful and destructive;—and I feel no hesitation in declaring, that this evil is the Stage.

One fair way of judging whether a Theatre be beneficial or injurious, is to suppose that it has its full influence, and produces all the effect which its principles are calculated to produce,

without any counteracting influence from Christianity. I will suppose a city, where the natural depravity of the human heart grows with no more than common luxuriance, when aided by companionship and example.—Let us conjecture that it is entirely destitute of every thing like religion, but what man is able to discover by his conscience, and the light of reason. Imagine, if you can, that some benevolent company of players, touched with compassion at the awful ignorance and wickedness of the inhabitants of this city, should kindly undertake to instruct them by amusement and theatrical representation.—And to complete the fiction, suppose they were to take with them a goodly number of the most popular dramatic pieces which have received the sanction and applause of a Christian audience; do you think that, after a fair trial, the inhabitants would be the better, or the worse for their instruction? Now I maintain, that a theatre much more pure than any Europe ever knew, was established in a city exactly circumstanced as the imaginary one which I have described; and the result was increasing depravity, immoral refinement, effeminacy, and destruction. The city to which I refer was Athens, and the theatre that which Wit and Genius did their utmost to support, and which received the homage of every Muse.

It is a remarkable fact, which the advocates of the Theatre, on the principle that it is the friend of morals, must account for if they can, that the Stage has flourished most in the most corrupt and depraved state of society. How comes it to pass, that in proportion as sound morality, industry, and religion, advance their influence, that the Theatre is deserted and neglected, and that it grows in favour in the same ratio as virtue and religion decline? How has it happened too, if the Stage be the school of virtue, that the most dissolute and abandoned of mankind are its passionate admirers, and warmest advocates; that those who trample on every moral obligation, and despise the sanctions of religion, have, in every age, afforded the Theatre their most cordial support? “ ’Tis strange, ’tis passing strange,” that those whose lives contradict almost every injunction in the Decalogue should be charmed with the beauty and excellence of virtue on the Stage. But the truth is, the Stage is the nursery of depravity, and the accomplice of crime. The virtue (falsely so called) which it inculcates, is vice softened and refined, or it would not receive the voluntary suffrage of every pupil of iniquity.

That the Theatre has widened the circle of dissipation—that it has given a mortal stab to the virtue and happiness of youth of both sexes

in the higher and middling classes of society, are facts too notorious to be denied, and too awful not to be deplored by every friend of human nature.

Dissipation and extravagance are fruitful sources of wretchedness, and are often the forerunners of every vice: to the love of pleasure the grave and necessary pursuits of life are made to yield, and expense is a trivial consideration when cupidity is to be gratified. But money is not always within the grasp—it is not always ready to administer to every rising wish; this generates gloomy discontent, or something worse. It not unfrequently leads to gambling among the higher, and to more unlicensed robbery among the lower classes of society—examples of which are often exhibited on the Stage. And if the hero be a man of spirit, his reputation suffers by such expedients but little diminution.

Another dreadful effect which the Theatre produces on morals is, that its votaries always consider reason, and the dictates of virtue, to be subordinate to Feeling. Feeling is paramount, and it is every thing; and because it is natural, it must therefore be right: thus revenge is often preferred to forgiveness, and the gratification of the moment to the self-denial of virtue. The school which teaches such a doctrine as this, can never surely be recommended as friendly to happiness, or to society.

It has indeed been urged, in defence of the Theatre, that it cherishes in the bosom those feelings which are called the charities of human life. But the power of fiction to seizè on the affections, awakens a kind of bastard sensibility—a sensibility which leaves the heart a stranger to compassion—a sensibility which led Sterne to weep over a dead ass, while he could suffer a living mother to mourn in poverty without either sympathy or assistance.

A superficial glance around a Theatre, during the representation of some moving spectacle, might induce the reflection that the audience was composed of the most amiable and compassionate beings in the world. Who that had not known him but would have thought the tyrant a mild and benevolent prince, when he melted into tears at the public theatre at Athens: alas! he was the most cruel and barbarous of men. Feeling is an indifferent substitute for principle,—it is capricious and uncertain; and in this view contributes nothing to our own, and but little to the happiness of others.

At the Theatre likewise those romantic notions are imbibed which disorder the imagination, which give a high and fictitious colouring to human life, and which lay the foundation for perpetual error and incessant mistakes. From the Theatre many a hapless young man has re-

turned to the world a Hero of romance, a wou'd-be Poet, a brainless Wit, or a fancied Roscius. Bloated with imaginary greatness, he arraigns the Providence which would depress him in the world, and spurns the advice which, to make him happy, would confine him to his original station. The spirit of prophecy is not necessary to foretel that the future lot of such an one must be misery.

I have instances before me, the recollection of which at this moment pains my heart, of the horribly transforming influence of the Theatre. It is there that vice steals upon the innocent and unsuspecting in the garb of pleasure. And some I have known who on visiting the Playhouse experienced first a change of manners and then of morals, till the character was depraved and virtue annihilated. These are not solitary instances; nor was the effect accidental,—it is what every rational being would naturally expect to follow, on the supposition that the Stage has any influence in the formation of character. For I am afraid what Dr. Johnson said of the plays of Congreve, is too applicable to the greater part of the most popular dramatic pieces of the present day—"It is acknowledged with universal conviction, that the perusal of his works will make no man better, and that their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice, and to relax

those obligations by which life ought to be regulated."

I would by no means be thought to institute a comparison between the plays of Congreve and those of our modern writers. Their scenes are not so luscious, nor is their language so indelicate and unchaste; yet in general their tendency is the same; and I conceive the present age is likely to sustain a far greater injury from its theatrical productions, than even that for which Congreve wrote. If our modern plays like his were openly immodest and licentious, they would then carry their own antidote with them, and the sober part of mankind would remove at a convenient distance from their contaminating influence. But as our writers for the stage now manage it, "Vice loses half its evil by losing all its grossness," and consequently is more dangerous than the barefaced obscenities of Dryden and his contemporary already mentioned. A DOUBLE ENTENDRE and an arch EQUIVOQUE are well understood and applied by a licentious audience; and the buzz of approbation which is heard through the whole assembly furnishes abundant proof that the effect is not lost. Modest impudence in a female form will indeed pretend to blush behind a fan, but with all her coyness the artful nymph is rather gratified than offended.

I have no doubt in addition to the evils already traced to the Theatre, that the alarming progress of Suicide, "our Island's shame," may be ascribed in a great measure to its influence; for there it is often represented, and in such a manner as to excite the admiration or pity of the audience. The case of Eustace Budgell, one of the writers in the Spectator, is strikingly in point, and proves the dangerous influence of what is reckoned one of the best moral plays in the English language. Having involved himself by extravagance in the deepest distress, he plunged into the Thames as the oblivion of sorrow, leaving on his bureau this justification of the fatal deed, "what Cato did, and Addison approved, cannot be wrong." That which is in its own nature evil, cannot by its legitimate influence be productive of good; that which has an immoral tendency will never promote morality.

It cannot indeed be denied that some dramatic pieces have been received with approbation, which abound in just sentiments, and which contain some good moral principles; but their success must be attributed to other causes than their moral tendency; for had they been filled with the most obnoxious general sentiments, their dramatic beauty and their construction for stage effect, would have rendered them quite as popular. The talents of the writer and not his

principles have secured him applause. This is not an unfair conclusion, because the same audience has bestowed praise on productions the most immoral and licentious, on account of the charms of poetry with which they were enriched, and their power to interest the passions.

But if it could even be established, that during a century as many as fifty moral plays have received the sanction of the public, this would not affect the general character of the Stage; and I believe it would be impossible, were we to consult the literary and dramatic annals of the last hundred years, to find ten plays that a Christian ought to recommend, or the leading heroes of which any man should consider as models to be observed, or as examples to be followed.

There is one view of the moral influence of the Theatre which I have not taken, and with which I shall conclude this chapter, and that is, its influence on FEMALE CHARACTER.

The importance of woman in society has been universally felt and acknowledged; her influence is potent; to her we are indebted for social comfort and domestic joy. Woman, lovely woman, is the sovereign of our happiness; and the virtue of the human race is committed to her hands. She is the depository and the guardian of the generation which is to adorn or disgrace a future age; and on her qualifications to

discharge the important trust, their destiny in a great measure depends. It is the glory of civilized man to pay this homage to the sex; and who would not with indignation oppose that which would degrade woman from her distinguished, important eminence? That which would rob her of the peculiar features of her character, which would unfit her for the performance of the various duties which belong to her station and her sex, is a dreadful evil which policy, interest, and every thing which can operate as a motive upon the human breast call upon us to detest. Preserve her native modesty,—let her heart confine its wishes and its affections within the circle of intellectual improvement—domestic duties and domestic pleasures, and woman becomes what her Creator designed, “a help meet for man,” the gentle friend of his youth; the kind instructor as well as the mother of his children; his counsellor in difficulties, the soother of his sorrows in affliction; and I may almost add, the arbitress of his fate. But transform her character: let modesty, the guardian of every female virtue, retire; let the averted eye which turns disgusted from the remotest approach of evil grow confident; let that delicacy of sentiment which feels a “stain like a wound” give place to fashionable apathy; let the love of home and a taste for the sweetly interesting em-

ployments of the domestic scene be exchanged for the pursuits of theatrical entertainment, and the vagrant disposition of a stylish belle, and the picture is reversed; the female is degraded, and society has lost its most powerful, captivating charm; man is comfortless and alone;—he must go abroad for pleasure—miserable wanderer! his children clasp the knees of a menial stranger—home has no attractions—he has no kindred heart to partake of his joys and sorrows; the world is before him; it allures and intoxicates, but it does not make him happy. Where is the enemy that has done this? What has dashed the cup of domestic enjoyment to the ground?—The Stage. Let the theatrical passion once be cherished in a female bosom, and farewell modesty: the taste is vitiated and domestic happiness is gone.

“It is at the Theatre (says the Abbe Clement) our daughters are taught the art of skilfully conducting an intrigue, of concealing from their parents the secrets of their hearts, of cherishing a passion condemned by propriety and morality.” If a daughter of mine could visit the Theatre, and tell me that she could view with pleasure the scenes in *Pizarro*, the *Stranger*, the *Virgin of the Sun*, *John Bull*, and twenty other popular dramatic pieces I could name, I should clasp my lost child to my bosom, weep at the thought

of innocence for ever fled, and mourn the day that made me a parent:—her soul is polluted, and that is the essence of prostitution; the dignity of virtue is lost—and what remains? If the mother of my children could spend her evenings at the Theatre, and be gratified with what is passing there, she would lose my confidence and forfeit my regard; for I should be sure she had lost the best qualifications of a wife.

There is a charm in native modesty, which when wanting only in appearance, renders the conversation even of a 'sensible woman insipid and disgusting. But I know not how the appearance of modesty can be retained, when the eye must be accustomed to scenes which ingenuous youth of the other sex can scarcely behold without horror. The world may call a woman virtuous, who with a countenance of brass can sit unmoved when heaven is insulted by profaneness, and the audience by oaths; when modesty is trampled on, and licentiousness indulged;—and this may be the current virtue of a depraved age: but give me the innocence which shrinks at the touch of vice. When the outworks of modesty are demolished, the conquest of the citadel is comparatively easy. The Stage has contributed a dreadful share to the immodesty of dress and manners which characterize the fashionable females of the day. It is there that Rustic

Simplicity has learnt to cast off its decent robe, and Rural Innocence has changed its modest blush, its retiring mien, for the theatrical stare, and the imposing, dauntless front of the actress.

Upon the whole I am persuaded, that the Theatre is a principal source from whence have flowed those contaminating streams, which have had so fatal an influence in depraving the female character in the higher classes of society. It is to this I fear we may trace the adulteries and the crimes of fashionable life; it is this too which has rendered the helpless female the easy prey of a false seducer. When once a woman is brought to consider the delirium of a heart abandoned to the disorder of the senses, to be virtue, and the indulgence of vitiated feelings, to be happiness,—persuasion may complete her ruin, and passion may be the harbinger of infamy. It is on the Stage “that passion is identified with virtue:” teach a female this, and where is the safeguard of honour; where the security of happiness? It is gone—it is fled for ever.

CHAP. IV.

THE CHARACTER OF THE STAGE AS DRAWN
BY HISTORIANS, PHILOSOPHERS, LEGISLA-
TORS, AND DIVINES.

COULD I summon into one interesting group the venerable men who have, in every age, instructed and astonished the world by their wisdom and their virtue, and collect their aggregate opinion on the character and moral influence of the Stage, the decision, were it uniform, would demand some consideration; and from it Presumption itself would not venture to appeal. But this is not practicable, nor is it necessary; their sentiments on this subject are upon record. There is scarcely a distinguished name among the philosophers, legislators, and moralists of the world but is hostile to the Theatre; and they have left, by their historians, or in their writings, an imperishable monument inscribed with their protest against the Stage.

“It is an invariable fact in the history of all nations (says Clement), a fact which has been carefully recorded by historians, that the refinement and increase of public spectacles has essen-

tially contributed to that universal depravation of public and private morality, which has almost always been either the secret or obvious cause of the fall of empires." "What caused the ruin of the flourishing republic of Greece? Ask the wisest of her philosophers, ask the most eloquent of her orators—the games, the Theatres; these excited a fondness for the magnificent and marvellous, and a disgust for simplicity and propriety. It was complained that the magistrates and people neglected the care of public affairs; the young men abandoned their salutary exercises to frequent the Theatres; the indolence and effeminacy of one sex produced delicacy and morbid sensibility in the other, and the dissoluteness of Greece became a proverb in history*."

Rome was long virtuous; and she remained so while the Theatre was unknown. Augustine beautifully remarks, that "*Theatricas artes virtus Romana non noverat.*" "But (observes a Roman author) when conquered Greece taught her this fatal art—she taught her, at the same time, all her vices. The wisest of the Romans foresaw this: he had strenuously opposed the establishment of a regular Theatre, asserting, that it would be to Rome a more dangerous Carthage than that which they had just de-

* Vide Justin, lib. 6.

stroyed. He then succeeded in his opposition, but unfortunately he succeeded but for a short time; and the event showed that Cato was not deceived*." Livy unites his testimony with that of Justin, and condemns the Theatre. Philosophers follow in the same train:—"Plays (says Plato) raise the passions, and pervert the use of them, and are of course dangerous to morality." Again: "The diversions of the Stage are dangerous to temper and sobriety; they swell anger and desire too much. Tragedy is apt to make men boisterous, and comedy buffoons. Those passions are cherished which ought to be checked: Virtue loses ground, and Reason grows precarious: Vice makes an insensible approach, and steals upon us in the disguise of pleasure." Legislators have joined their protest to Historians and Philosophers. The wisest legislators of Greece and Rome did their utmost to damp a theatrical spirit, but in vain. Thespis, the first improver of the Dramatic art, lived in the time of Solon; "That wise legislator (says Rollin), upon seeing his pieces performed, expressed his dislike by striking his staff against the ground."

I might fatigue the reader with quotations from names of the most distinguished eminence: it would be tedious, it would be useless. It is

* See an excellent Sermon, entitled, *The Stage*, by the Abbe Clement.

enough to remark, that Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cicero, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Solon and Cato, Seneca and Tacitus,, the most venerable men of antiquity; a constellation of talents and virtues, the greatest that ever shone, have all condemned the Stage. We may add to these, the Fathers of the Church.

Augustine confesses, with a noble frankness worthy of a true penitent, that at the Theatre he imbibed all the venom which corrupted his heart. “ Yes (said Tertullian), I will grant that your theatrical representations are simple, fascinating, and even respectable: but does he who prepares a poisonous draught mix gall and wormwood in the bowl? No: he conceals its deadly qualities by infusing sweet and aromatic ingredients.” “ Even (observes St. Augustine) if there were no other objection to the Theatre than the public intercourse of the sexes, not to speak of the criminal behaviour of women utterly destitute of modesty, who seek, by their languishing gestures, their penetrating voices, their empoisoned action, to enflame, to consume you with the fierceness of desire: not to urge this, were there no other objection to the Theatre than the sight of a sex always dangerous, but then still more so, when their charms are improved by every ornament that taste and luxury can invent; alas! even then it would be the

surest snare of innocence." Miss Baille, a modern writer of most admirable talents, though she does not absolutely condemn the Stage, is constrained, as a moralist, to enter her protest against *Busy*, that is, fashionable comedy: "The moral tendency of it (she observes) is very faulty; that mockery of age, and domestic authority, so constantly held forth, has a very bad effect upon the younger part of an audience, and that continual lying and deceit in the first characters of the piece, which is necessary for conducting the plot, has a most pernicious one."

I conclude the tedious work of quotation by an extract from Collier*; the veteran chief in

* It is fashionable to stigmatize this writer as a sour puritan; with what propriety, will be evident from a perusal of the following remarks of Johnson:—"Collier, a fierce and implacable nonjuror, knew that an attack upon the Theatre would never make him suspected for a puritan; he therefore published *A short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*; I believe with no other motive than religious zeal and honest indignation. He was formed for a controversialist; with sufficient learning; with diction vehement and pointed, though often vulgar and incorrect; with unconquerable pertinacity; with wit in the highest degree, keen and sarcastic; and with all those powers, exalted and invigorated by just confidence in his cause." As a specimen of his style and manner, I will furnish the reader with the concluding paragraph of his preface to the *Short View*:—"There is one thing more to acquaint the reader with; 'tis, that I have ventured to change the terms of mistress and lover for others somewhat more plain, but much more proper. I don't look upon this as

this warfare, who in his day vanquished the greatest dramatic writers: "As for innocent diversions I have nothing to say against them: but I think people should take care not to relieve their spirits at the expense of their virtue—nor to cure melancholy with madness, and shake off their spleen and their reason together."

It will perhaps be opposed to this list of authorities, that the objections I have quoted are levelled against the abuse of the Theatre, that they affect the ancient, and not the modern Drama: but I beg leave to remark, that these censures are strikingly applicable to Theatres as they have ever been managed, and to plays as they have generally been written. An immaculate Stage is one of the wonders of Utopia. But those who are so fond of pleading for the Theatre, under the notion of what it may become, should not go thither:—I think I could

any failure in civility. As good and evil are different in themselves, so they ought to be differently marked. To confound them in speech is the way to confound them in practice. Ill qualities ought to have ill names to prevent their being catching. Indeed THINGS are, in a great measure, governed by WORDS; to gild over a foul character serves only to perplex the idea, to encourage the bad, and mislead the unwary. To treat honour and infamy alike is an injury to virtue, and a sort of levelling in morality. I confess I have no ceremony for debauchery. For to compliment vice is but one remove from worshipping the devil."

venture to assure them that a blameless Stage would afford them no amusement.

The reputation of the Theatre has never been high among any who have had any regard for their own. The Fathers of the Church, Philosophers and Divines, enlightened Statesmen, and genuine Patriots, have all concurred to consider the Stage as dangerous and destructive. One of the most strenuous writers in defence of the Theatre (I do not say the most convincing) I ever remember to have read, advises notwithstanding that the public should hold it with a "Tight rein." It is bad indeed when an advocate, after exhausting so much rhetoric in behalf of a client, informs the court that he is not to be trusted; and advises the judge to tie his hands to prevent his doing mischief. I think this gentleman has mistaken his object; instead of vindicating, he has indeed condemned the Theatre, and adds his suffrage to those distinguished characters already quoted; among whom no doubt, after mature consideration, he will be proud to enrol his name.

CHAP. V.

WHETHER THE STAGE IS IN A STATE OF MORAL IMPROVEMENT CONSIDERED.

THE design, of this chapter is to represent the futility of those arguments which would prolong the existence of a Theatre until it attain a degree of purity, which will effectually silence the objections of the religious fanatic, and the rigid moralist. Great stress has been laid on the advances which it has already made towards perfection. The comparative state of the Drama, in the reigns of Charles the Second and George the Third, has been exultingly made. The difference in APPEARANCE is certainly great. But I am afraid that its principles and RADICAL state are precisely the same; that they have been the same in every age; and that no real improvement in this respect can reasonably be expected.

It is essential to the existence of the Stage, that it should have charms to attract the gay and the fashionable; it must please; not merely by gratifying a poetical taste, and by simple Dramatic composition, but by delineating character

and manners. The character and manners it must delineate, are those of the vicious and depraved; or if it pourtray the virtues, it must confine its pictures to the showy and the splendid: and though it may shoot the follies of mankind, it must not cut the heart, or touch the conscience.

This consideration of itself for ever confounds the expectations of those who could improve an established Theatre. It would be a hopeless project to construct a Stage solely to amuse Poets and Philosophers—such a stage could never be supported:—there must be something to attract the multitude, and to obtain an audience sufficiently large to defray the expenses of a Theatre; something in fact suited to the general taste. The Theatre, to support itself in splendor, must be the creature of the public. And those who are acquainted with human nature need not to be told, that the strong hand of the legislature is absolutely necessary to preserve a popular amusement within the bounds of decency.

The principles, the pleasures, the conduct of mankind, must be changed before the Stage can be morally improved. It is a truth which requires little reasoning to establish it, that the Theatre, which derives its existence from the will of society, must always remain what that society chooses to make it. Depravity and vice, which

are now the general features of the world, must yield to purity and virtue before we can expect the transformation of the Stage. The Theatre is the immoral creature of an immoral audience :

“ The Drama’s laws, the Drama’s patrons give,
And those who live to please, must please to live.”

It is the prerogative of a system entirely divine to effect the moral revolution of mankind; no human contrivance, no worldly institution, will ever produce it.

It may be confidently asked, What are the data on which the theatrical visionary builds his conclusion, that that which has been the bane will one day become the blessing of the world? As well may we expect all noxious things to change their nature: the thorn may as suddenly arise to the tall majestic fir, and the thistle become a vine. To be consistent with themselves, those who tell us that the Theatre is on the march of improvement, should adopt the ridiculous theory of the perfectibility of man, and believe that we carry in our depraved heart and fragile body the seeds of future renovation and of immortal vigour.

The natural tendency of all evil things is from bad to worse; the intervention of circumstances may impede the progress of depravity—may preserve it stationary for a time; ingenious so-

phistry, and artful refinement, may cover it with a veil to conceal its deformity, but they can never change its nature. It is readily conceded, as I have more than once remarked, that evil is not essential to mere dramatic representation, but it is essential to a Theatre; and never did a Theatre exist which did not gratify the pride, the passion, and the folly of the human heart. Here the advocates of the Stage and its opponents are at issue; and it devolves on the former to disprove what has been urged against it, on the ground that it cannot, in a moral point of view, be **ESSENTIALLY** reformed.

The Theatre is a mirror, in which are reflected the vices and follies of mankind; its legitimate object is to "show the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure; and of course its improvement can never be greater than the moral improvement of the world. The boasted superiority of the Drama of the present above any former age, will be little credited by an impartial person, who will take the pains of comparing modern theatrical productions with those of the most licentious period in the days that are past.

The recent introduction of the German Drama may be considered as a phænomenon in the world of dissipation. The writings of Congreve and Dryden are absolutely pure, when compared

with the vile disgusting offspring of the profligate Kotzebue; and yet the plays of this writer have been the principal source from whence an English audience, for several winters past, have derived their instruction and amusement: even women have submitted to the shameful task of translating pages which modesty never ought to have perused.

“ When the Stranger was introduced to the public (says a good writer) many of our fair dames welcomed him to this hospitable metropolis. Their sympathy for the poor adulteress, so ably defended by Kotzebue, was a striking proof of their sensibility; and from the recent instances of *CRIM CON*, it may be conjectured that the system of our male and female marriage haters is daily obtaining new proselytes. But the triumph of Kotzebue was incomplete till the appearance of Pizarro. That renowned Spanish warrior was conjured up from the ‘Pale nations of the dead’ to conquer a country which the Armada had assailed in vain. The extraordinary effects of this melange of tragedy, farce, and pantomime were indescribable. Multitudes crowded to the Theatre, where they were amused with thunder and lightening; while the sonorous rant of Rolla, and the drawling whine of Cora, excited universal sympathy. Seized as it were with a general hysteric affection, the ladies blub-

bered to the great detriment of their eyes; while the men, animated by the bombast of Rolla, gazed with ardent sensations of heroism. So easy is it to be benevolent when there is nothing to be given; and so undaunted is true valour when there is no danger nigh! As Kotzebue eloquently pleaded the cause of the adulteress in the Stranger, so, in his Natural Son, or as it has been called by an English play-monger his Lovers' Vows, he has placed a kind unwedded fair one in an equally amiable and affecting point of view. The Noble Lie, written by the same dramatist, is another proof of the felicity of his invention in the extenuation of guilt."

Let us hear no more then of the moral improvement of the Stage; its character is indelibly marked, and a review of its favourite productions is as dishonourable to the present, as the plays of that period were disgraceful to the age of Charles the Second: the principles are the same: the change is only in modification. In the former, morals were openly attacked; in the latter, they are artfully undermined: but their destruction is equally the object of both. In confirmation of this sentiment, it is not a little flattering to be able again to boast of the celebrated Miss Baille as an auxiliary: "At the beginning of its career, (she remarks) the Drama

was employed to mislead and excite; and were I not unwilling to refer to transactions of the present times, I might abundantly confirm what I have said by recent examples."

CHAP. VI. *

CURSORY OBSERVATIONS ON THE WRITERS
FOR THE STAGE, ON THE ACTORS, AND THE
AUDIENCE, ILLUSTRATIVE OF ITS DAN-
GEROUS AND IMMORAL TENDENCY.

THAT which has prostituted and debased the finest talents, instead of claiming the favour, certainly merits the severest reprobation of mankind. It is truly affecting to behold men sacrifice the dignity of superior intellect at the shrine of folly and of vice; yet such has been the sacrifice the Theatre has demanded of its writers. It is a notorious fact, that Theatrical Authors relax, soften, and abridge the code of morals: to be successful, they must always accommodate their characters to the prevailing taste; instead of giving "Ardour to virtue and confidence to truth," which is the only dignified employment of literary talents, they must submit to the humiliating drudgery of gratifying the wishes of the voluptuous and the proud, the licentious and the vain.

The men who have instructed and delighted the world, Addison and Johnson, Thomson and Young, were indeed captivated by the lucrative

rewards of the Drama and wrote for the Stage. But how short-lived was their dramatic fame:---these writers could not descend:—they would maintain, even on the Stage, the dignity of the moralist; and this, to a polite audience, rendered their productions dull and uninteresting: yet, it must be acknowledged, warped by the Theatre, they have too often amidst the finest moral sentiments departed from the simplicity of virtue. Addison in his *Cato*, sacrifices at the shrine of Patriotism, Fortitude and Magnanimity, and reduces his hero at last to a dastardly coward; who, rather than endure the ills he felt, abandoned the post of honour for the grave of the suicide.

Johnson indeed, “The majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom,” disdained to court applause as a writer of tragedy at the expense of his taste and virtue, and the consequence was—his “*Irene* did not please the public.” The great dramatic favourites have generally been men of libertine principles. Shakespeare* and Congreve,

* I am sorry that necessity obliges me to mention “Nature’s favourite child,” our immortal bard, in terms of disapprobation. The magic of his genius, I am free to acknowledge, has often held me in enthusiastic admiration; and, captivated by the charms of glowing sentiment and exquisite poetry which abound in his works, I felt reluctance in classing him with the authors who have contributed to spread immorality and misery among mankind. But bare-faced obscenities, low vulgarity,

Rowe, Otway, and Kotzebue, have borne away the palm from every competitor. The talents of these writers have been eminent; but a "Peck of refuse wheat" would more than buy the virtue of all the tribe. Who is there that does not feel the bitterness of regret, while contemplating the greatest intellectual powers, the strongest energies of native genius exhausted and spent in degrading the human character, which they were intended to exalt and improve? Enlisted on the

and nauseous vice, so frequently disfigure and pollute his pages, that we cannot but lament the "luckless hour" in which he became a writer for the Stage. This it was that degraded and debased the noblest powers that ever distinguished a human being; but for THIS, Shakspeare would never have thus ignominiously descended.—On the plays of Shakspeare, Mrs. Moore has ventured the following very pertinent observations:—"With these excellencies the works of this most unequal of all poets contain so much that is vulgar, so much that is absurd, and so much that is impure, so much indecent levity, false wit, and gross descriptions, that he should be only read in parcels, and with the nicest selection.

The sentiments of this excellent writer, on the morality of Rowe and Otway, deserve some regard. Contrasting the professed objects of their dramatic pieces with their execution she exclaims—"In how many, for instance, of the favourite tragedies of Rowe and Otway, which are most frequently acted, do we find passages, and even whole scenes of a directly contrary tendency: passages calculated to awaken those very passions, which it was the professed object of the author to counteract—

"First raising a combustion of desire,

With some cold moral they would quench the fire."

side of virtue, what might not these men have achieved? But viewed as they are, the menial servants of the Stage, who can think of them without pity!

It surely is no inconsiderable argument against the Theatre, that it made even Addison forget his virtue and his creed; and degraded men of more genius and less principle from eminence they might have attained, to dishonour and infamy; which, for the sake of lucre and temporary renown, they were willing to incur. If a tribunal had not been established which pays homage to talents without virtue, the strongest temptation to vice would not have existed; and without profit or applause, few men would take pleasure in disseminating immorality and misery for their own sake.

Another collateral argument of some importance against the Stage, may be drawn from the general character of PLAYERS. The sentiments of mankind have ever consigned this wretched class of beings to infamy. The story of the unfortunate Laberius, exhibits in a strong point of view the odium which was attached to the profession of an actor among the Romans. Compelled by Cæsar at an advanced period of life, to appear on the Stage to recite some of his own works, he felt his character as a Roman Citizen insulted and disgraced; and in some affecting

verses spoken on the occasion, he incensed the audience against the tyrant, by whose mandate he was obliged to appear before them. "After having lived (said he) sixty years with honour, I left my house this morning a Roman knight, but shall return to it this evening an INFAMOUS STAGE PLAYER. Alas! I have lived a day too long!" It is impossible to entertain respect for a player; and there is not a family of any consideration in Britain, which would not count it an indelible disgrace if any of its members were to embrace this dishonourable profession.

It may not be improper to inquire, on what this almost universal detestation of such employment is founded. The common sense of mankind is seldom, perhaps never wrong; what all concur to disapprove must be liable to serious objections. The reasons which render the profession of an actor contemptible, are so conspicuously and dispassionately stated by Dr. Witherspoon, that, together with my respect for the memory of the worthy author, and the consciousness that it is not in my power to do the subject so much justice in other words, I am induced to quote a page or two of his admirable Letter respecting Play Actors.

"*First*, All powers and talents whatever, though excellent in themselves, when they are applied to the single purpose of amusing the idle,

vain, or vicious part of society, become contemptible.

“ There is not upon record among the sayings of bold men, one more remarkable than that of Sobrius the tribune, to Nero the Roman emperor; when asked by the emperor, why he, who was one of his personal guards, had conspired against him? He answered, I loved you as much as any man, as long as you deserved to be loved, but I began to hate you, when, after the murder of your wife and mother, you became a charioteer, a COMEDIAN and a buffoon. I am sensible, that in this reasoning, I consider theatrical pieces, properly speaking, as intended for amusement, I am not however ignorant, that some have dignified them with the character of schools or lessons of morality.

“ But as they have been generally called, and are still called by many writers, AMUSEMENTS, so I am confident every body must perceive, that this was their original purpose, and will be their capital and their principal effect. It seems to me of consequence in this argument to observe, that what is true of theatrical exhibitions, is true of every other effect of human genius or art, when applied to the purposes of amusement and folly, they become contemptible. Of all external accomplishments there is none that has been for many ages held in greater esteem than

good horsemanship. It has been said, that the human form never appears with greater dignity than when a handsome man appears on horseback, with proper and elegant management of that noble creature. Yet when men employ themselves in singular and whimsical feats, standing instead of riding upon a horse at full gallop, or upon two horses at once, or other feats of the like nature, in order to amuse the vain, and gather money from the foolish, it immediately appears contemptible. And for my own part, I would no more hold communication with a master of the Circus than a manager of the Theatre. And I should be sorry to be thought to have any intimacy with either the one or the other.

“The general observation which I have made, applies to all human arts of every kind and class. Music has always been esteemed one of the finest arts, and was originally used in the worship of God, and the praise of heroes. Yet, when music is applied to the purposes of amusement only, it becomes wholly contemptible. And I believe the public performers, from the men-singers and women-singers of Solomon, to the singers in the present Theatres, are considered as in a disgraceful employment. I am happy to have even Lord Chesterfield on politeness, for my assistant in this cause: for though he acknowledges music to be one of the fine arts, yet he thinks to be

too great a connoisseur, and to be always fiddling and playing, is not consistent with the character of a gentleman.

“ In the *second* place, as players have been generally persons of loose morals, so their employment directly leads to the corruption of the heart. It is an allowed principle among critics, that no human passion or character can be well represented unless it be felt: this they call entering into the spirit of the part. Now I suppose, the following philosophical remark is equally certain, that every human passion, especially when strongly felt, gives a certain modification to the blood and spirits, and makes the whole frame more susceptible of its return. Therefore, whoever has justly and strongly acted human passions that are vicious will be more prone to these same passions; and indeed, with respect to the whole character, they will soon be in reality what they have so often seemed to be.

“ This applies to the whole extent of theatrical representation. Whoever has acted the part of a proud or revengeful person, I should not like to fall in his way when offended: and if any man has often acted the part of a rogue or deceiver, I should not be willing to trust him with my money. It may either be added as another remark, or considered as a further illustration of the one last made, that players by so frequently appearing

in an assumed character, lose all character of their own. ‘Nothing, says an eminent and learned writer, is more awkward and insipid, than a player out of the line of his own profession.’ And indeed what must that memory and brain be, where the constant business of its possessor is to obliterate one scene or system of folly, only to make way for another?

“In the *third* place, I cannot help thinking it is of some moment to observe, that players, in consequence of their profession, appearing continually in an assumed character, or being employed in preparing to assume it, must lose all sense of sincerity and truth. Truth is so sacred a thing that even the least violation of it is not without its degree of guilt and danger. It was far from being so absurd as it often has been said to be, what the old Spartan answered to an Athenian who spoke to him of the fine lessons found in their tragedies; “I think I could learn virtue much better from our own rules of truth and justice, than by hearing your lies.

“I will here observe, that some very able and judicious persons have given it as a serious and important advice to young persons, to guard against mimicking and taking off others, as it is called, in language, voice, and gesture,—because it tends to destroy the simplicity and dignity of personal manners and behaviour. I myself in

early life, knew a young man of good talents, who absolutely unfitted himself for public speaking by this practice. He was educated for the ministry, and was in every respect well qualified for the office; but having without suspicion frequently amused himself and others by imitating the tones and gestures of the most eminent preachers of the city where he lived, when he began to preach himself, he could not avoid falling into one or other of those tones which he had so often mimicked. This, as soon as it was perceived, threw the audience into a burst of laughter, and he was soon obliged to quit the profession altogether for no other reason, than that he had thus spoiled himself by the talent of imitation. I may say further, in support of this remark, that I have known no instance of one eminent for mimicking, who did not in time make himself contemptible.

“ But the human passion that makes the most conspicuous figure in the Theatre, is LOVE. A play without intrigue and gallantry would be no play at all. This passion is of all others that which has produced the greatest degree of guilt and misery in the history of mankind. Now is it, or can it be denied, that actors in the Theatre are trained up in the knowledge and exercise of this passion in all its forms? It seems to have been a sentiment of this kind that led a certain author to say, that to send young people to the

Theatre to form their manners, is to expect that they will learn virtue from profligates, and modesty from harlots."

As then the profession of an actor is so ignominious, and as it has uniformly debased the human character, what virtuous mind will contribute to the support of a class of men so miserable, and whose very employment must render them contemptible?

SHUTER, whose facetious powers convulsed whole audiences with laughter, and whose companionable qualities often "Set the table in a roar," was a miserable being. The following anecdote of him, told from the best authority, will confirm this assertion; and I am afraid were we acquainted with many of his profession, we should find that his case is by no means a singular one.---Shuter had heard Mr. Whitefield, and trembled with apprehension of a judgment to come; he had also frequently heard Mr. Kinsman, and sometimes visited him in London. One day accidentally meeting him in Plymouth, after some years of separation, he embraced him with rapture and enquired if that was the place of his residence:—Mr. Kinsman replied, "Yes, but I am just returned from London, where I have preached so often and to such large auditories, and have been so indisposed, that Dr. Fothergill advised my immediate return to the country for change of

air." "And I," said Shuter, "have been acting Sir John Falstaff so often, that I thought I should have died, and the physicians advised me to come into the country for the benefit of the air. Had you died it would have been in serving the best of masters, but had I, it would have been in the service of the devil. Oh sir, do you think I shall ever be called again? I certainly was once, and if Mr. Whitfield had let me come to the Lord's table with him, I never should have gone back again. But the caresses of the great are exceedingly ensnaring. My Lord E----- sent for me to day and I was glad I could not go. Poor things! They are unhappy and they want Shuter to make them laugh. But O, sir! such a life as yours:—as soon as I leave you I shall be king Richard. This is what they call a good play, as good as some sermons. I acknowledge there are some striking and moral things in it; but after it I shall come in again with my farce of "A Dish of all Sorts," and knock all that on the head. Fine reformers we! Poor Shuter, once more thou wilt be an object of sport to the frivolous and the gay, who will now laugh at thee, not for thy drollery, but thy seriousness; and this story probably will be urged against thee as the weakness of a noble mind; weakness let it be called, but in spite of himself man must be serious at last. And when a player awakes to

sober reflection, what agony must seize upon his soul. Let those auditories which the comic performer has convulsed with laughter, witness a scene in which the actor retires and the man appears; let them behold him in the agonies of death, looking back with horror on a life of guilt, while despair is mingled with anticipations of the future. Players have no leisure to learn to die; and if a serious thought wander into the mind, the painful sigh which it excites is suppressed, and, with an awful desperation, the wretched creature rushes into company to be delivered from himself. A more careless, a more unreflecting being than a player cannot exist; for if an intense impression of the dignity of reason, the importance of character, and future responsibility be once felt, he can be a player no longer.

Upon what principles then of Christianity, or of moral obligation, can I hire an individual to prostitute his talents and his life to that which must render him infamous and wretched, and which, with respect to myself and family, I should esteem a reproach and a serious calamity? Benevolence, the great law of universal equity, the welfare of society, of which players are the pest, call upon us in an imperious tone, to relinquish an amusement which demands the sacrifice of so many human victims.

We have shuddered at the barbarous cruelty

of the Indian Tribes, when, to appease their gods, they have cherished devotion with the warm blood of humanity; and when we have seen the horrid libation poured out to their execrable deities, our hearts have bled with compassion. But are we not chargeable with an enormity much more shocking, when we erect the Stage as an altar, and immolate to the god of pleasure the talents, the morals, the eternal happiness of so many immortal beings, who from time to time and in quick succession are consigned to infamy worse than death in this Temple of delusion?—It is true, we endeavour to calm the perturbed spirits of our departed Heroes of the Boards, by raising monuments to their fame in the cloistered abbey; but could Garrick rise from the tomb, with what indignation would he trample into dust the marble that perpetuates his disgrace.

No man presents a stronger proof of the fatal influence of the profession of an actor on character than David Garrick. This Roscius of his day, this universal favourite, what is his posthumous renown? What advantages have society derived from the exercise of his talents? What would the world have been injured if he had never lived, and what was the loss it sustained when he died? Take a man of equal celebrity from any of the honourable departments of life, either a Lawyer, a Divine, or a man of Literature, and

compare him with Garrick. Read together the memoirs of their lives, and you will find that the actor degraded the man; and that a comparison of him with a fellow-being of equal talents and equal fame in another profession, is infinitely to his disadvantage.

When Johnson and Garrick launched forth together on the ocean of life, their condition was the same—"Unknowing and unknown," they had each a character to form and reputation to acquire. And now they have gained the port, and live but in the sentiments of mankind, let us view the memorial with which their names are handed down to posterity. Garrick lived a trifler;—never was a life more barren of incidents which reflect honour on human nature than his:—a moral lesson never fell from his lips. In a prologue, he even ridiculed Dr. Young for wishing to appropriate the profits of his play to the spread of the gospel. Under opposition he was fretful and malicious;—in prosperity he appeared a compound of arrogance, envy and vanity. He is known but by his biographer; and I think no man who reads his life will say, "I wish I had been Garrick." Johnson, on the contrary, will be remembered and revered to the latest posterity. There is indeed a ruggedness in his character, a sort of repellent quality, that rendered him not very amiable in the drawing-room; but this moroseness, if it may

be called by so harsh a name, in a great measure proceeded from his circumstances. Let us represent to ourselves Johnson, the greatest of human beings, struggling with poverty, encountering difficulties, and often depending for the next meal on the resources of his own talents, or the precarious humours of unfeeling booksellers, and we shall not be surprized that his character was deeply tinctured with something which certainly does not resemble the milk of human kindness*: but with all his failings, the conversation of Johnson was always interesting, always instructive; he was the friend of religion, and drew his sublime morality from this its purest source. He and Garrick lived for the public; but the one was its creature, its ape, its mimic, while the other enriched it with lessons of wisdom, and incited it to virtue by the persuasives of eloquence aided by sincerity in the cause.

* I have endeavoured, in the delineation of the character of this great man, says one of his biographers, with equal care to avoid the extremes of praise and blame; I trust to the charity, the gratitude, and the justice of impartial posterity. that the failings of a man, whose whole life was a conflict with pain and adversity, will either be forgiven or forgotten; and that the remembrance of his virtues, and a reverence for the wonderful endowments of his mind, and his zeal in the employment of them to the best purposes, will be coeval with those excellent lessons of religion, morality, and æconomical wisdom which he has left behind him.

Johnson's best eulogium is his works, which will be read with admiration as long as taste, literature, and virtue are preserved among men. There is this difference in the feelings of a person who reads the lives of Garrick and Johnson---Garrick we pity, Johnson we admire:---with Garrick we are often disgusted and mortified; the more we know of Johnson the more we desire to learn. In closing the last volume of Garrick's memoirs we sigh and say, "This man lived in vain!" but as we draw on to the evening of Johnson's life, it is with sad reluctance:---we think not even Boswell tedious; we would protract the history; and when we are forced to shut the volume, it is with this conviction, "It is happy for the world that Johnson lived!"

Having introduced Dr. Johnson on this subject, as a contrast to Garrick, to show the pernicious influence of the Stage on the character of a player of eminent talents in his profession,---it may not be amiss to enquire what ideas our great moralist entertained of the employment. In his life of Savage, he speaks of the condition of an actor, as that which makes almost "Every man, for whatever reason, contemptuous, insolent, petulant, selfish and brutal." That there have been a few exceptions to this, that Mrs. Siddons and two or three others have retained a virtuous character, notwithstanding all the temptations and blandish-

ments of the profession, is no argument against this general, notorious fact. In a town infected with the plâgue, an individual or two may have escaped the contagion; but who would welcome the pestilence into their neighbourhood, because it has not been universally destructive; or who would seriously argue, that because some constitutions have withstood its power that it is therefore harmless?

The argument against the Theatre, drawn from the general character of players, will, I am aware, have little influence on those who would sacrifice the human race if it could administer to their pleasure; to propose such an argument to them, they will say, betrays the most arrant fanaticism. Those who can deride a WILBERFORCE for his noble exertions to effect the abolition of the slave trade, because luxury demands its continuance; will laugh too at the attempt which would restore the degraded player to the dignity of a human being, by destroying a profession which, though it has made him infamous, affords amusement and pleasure to the fashionable and the gay.

But perhaps it may be urged, that the man who commences actor does it from choice, and that the degradation is on his part voluntary. But is not female prostitution voluntary likewise? And is not that man guilty of a breach of moral

obligation, is he not an enemy to society, who supports a prostitute? That a player voluntarily embraces a profession that sinks him into contempt, is a proof of his degeneracy. But are we to be partakers of other men's sins? Because there was a wretch like Hubert to be found, was the murderer John less criminal, when he employed him to assassinate the infant prince of whom he should have been the protector, the guardian, the friend?

Pretended benevolence, I know, may still plead for a Theatre, under the idea that players are fit for nothing else; that disgust at the sober and honourable occupations of life, and a moral inability to discharge its duties, together with a love of vanity and an eager desire of applause, first led them to tread the boards; that persons of this description are only qualified to be the menial servants of the public; and that if we take away from them figure, gesture, enunciation and the power of memory—there is “*Preterea nihil.*”—There would be indeed some weight in this consideration, if the disease which afflicts the moral constitution of these poor creatures were not contagious; if it did not infect others, and contribute to enlarge the sphere of vice and misery. Could we convert the Theatre into a sort of Bedlam, and not suffer these raging children of passion and folly to propagate their

wretchedness, we might gratify the best feelings of the heart, and indulge a compassion which reason and humanity would justify.

There is another argument on which some persons lay great stress, and which I am afraid will render all the former reasoning against players and the Theatre ineffectual;—and that is, if we abolish the Stage, people of fashion will be deprived of the most productive topic of conversation. Deduct from fashionable discourse the last night's play, Kemble's attitudes, and the affected tragic strutting of the infant Betty, and what remains? If the Theatre did not kindly relieve the embarrassments arising from the want of subjects to talk of in many genteel circles, after the bow and the stare, they would have nothing to do but to bow again and retire. We must have players, that those things called Beaus and Belles may not be reduced to mere automata, or given up to dismal ennui. The happiness of so important a part of society ought surely to induce hesitation before we rashly and barbarously propose the abolition of the Stage.

To one who views the Theatre, and its admirers, in the same contemptible light, this is a consideration of little moment; and such an one will not even now be convinced that players should sacrifice the dignity of human nature, and every thing that is dear to man, to compli-

ment the fashionable world. It is indeed the province of the unhappy individuals themselves to decide on this. But it should be the determination of every friend of humanity to leave the support of the Theatre to those who derive from it this only advantage which it can possibly yield.

In addition to what has been already written on the pernicious and destructive influence of the Stage, the AUDIENCE which it usually attracts, is an argument which should be seriously weighed. I cannot help considering the Theatre in this view, as the enchanted ground of iniquity; it is here that vice lifts up its head with undaunted courage; that the most licentious and abandoned females endeavour, by meretricious ornament, and every art which lascivious wantonness can invent, to allure the young and inconsiderate, who, with passions enkindled by what is passing on the Stage, are thrown off their guard, and thus fatally prepared to fall the victims of seduction. The avenues to the Theatres, the box-lobby, and many of the most conspicuous places in it, are filled with women of this description. On the stage there is every thing to excite improper ideas in the mind, and in the audience every thing to gratify them. The emotion is soon inflamed to a passion; reason quickly yields to its powerful empire, and ruin is too often the fatal consequence.

I know it is by no means unusual to condemn this mode of reasoning as inconclusive. It has been said, that temptations to vice are to be found every where, and that the Church is as dangerous in this respect as the Theatre. This however is not true. Temptations are no where armed with such power as at the Playhouse. That the abomination of desolation sometimes intrudes into the holy place, and pollutes the sanctuary, is an awful truth. But is there not in a place of worship every thing to check unhallowed passions, and to counteract the influence of vice in its most seductive forms? At the house of prayer we have heard of infamous women, who came to scoff, shrinking with horror, and trembling with apprehension; and, instead of seducing others, they have been themselves reclaimed. But the Theatre, by its own proper influence, and the coinciding influence of accidental evil in the audience, has made a thousand male and female prostitutes; while at Church, there perhaps was never a youth of UNTAINTED morals who fell into the snare of female profligacy. They are not men of virtue who are seduced at Church:—that man must have been PRACTISED in iniquity who could suffer himself to be led astray from before the altar: but a youth hitherto innocent and uncontaminated may fall an easy victim at the

Theatre. The sighs and tears of many wretched parents, whose children have been swallowed up in this vortex of dissipation, are in the place of a thousand arguments against the destructive tendency of a Theatre, and a theatrical audience.

Sir John Hawkins, in his *Life of Johnson*, has a remark which strikingly illustrates what I have now advanced. "Although it is said of plays, that they teach morality; and of the Stage, that it is the mirror of human life: these assertions are mere declamation, and have no foundation in truth or experience: on the contrary, a Playhouse, and the regions about it, are the very hot-beds of vice. How else comes it to pass, that no sooner is a Playhouse opened in any part of the kingdom, than it becomes surrounded by an Halo of Brothels? Of this truth the neighbourhood of the place I am now speaking of (*Goodman's Fields Theatre*) has had experience; one parish alone, adjacent thereto, having, to my knowledge, expended the sum of 1300*l.* in prosecutions, for the purpose of removing those inhabitants whom, for instruction in the science of human life, the Playhouse had drawn thither."

Let the contents of this chapter, and their agreement with facts, be seriously examined and dispassionately considered, and I have no doubt

that every impartial mind will justify the conclusion to which I am brought—that the Stage is evil only evil, and that the welfare of society, and the happiness of the world, call loudly for its abolition. But as this cannot be expected in the present state of things, the wise and the virtuous should at least discountenance it, both by their influence and example.

CHAP. VII.

THE STAGE CONSIDERED WITH RESPECT TO
ITS INFLUENCE IN RETARDING THE PRO-
GRESS OF VITAL CHRISTIANITY.

CHRISTIANITY is the balm of life; its healing virtue invigorates the exhausted powers, enlivens the depressed spirits, silences tormenting apprehensions, and tranquillizes the agitated breast. There is no case of misery which it cannot reach; there is no depth of human woe which it cannot fathom: "Like the fabled power of enchantment, it changes the thorny couch into a bed of down; closes with a touch the wounds of the soul; and converts a wilderness of sorrow into the borders of paradise." But Christianity, calculated as it is to banish guilt and wretchedness from the world, is powerless and ineffectual until it becomes a vital principle in the heart, until its doctrines are cordially embraced, and its morality implicitly obeyed. To yield a cold assent to its evidences, to enlist under its standard by merely wearing its name as a badge of distinction, is in fact not to believe.

in it at all:—it must be welcomed to the bosom, and must there be enthroned, or the blessings which follow in its train can never be enjoyed.

Perhaps there are very few persons who would deliberately renounce the Christian faith, I would hope there are fewer still who do not shudder with abhorrence when they think of the philosophical association, with Voltaire at its head, which was formed to annihilate Christianity, and whose watch-word, when the Redeemer's honour was to be assailed, was, "Crush the wretch." But it is to be feared there are many of this description, who, while they believe that a disavowal of Christianity would be the renunciation of all future hope, are yet very far from being Christians indeed. They really and in fact give up every thing in Christianity but the name; that they retain as a sort of charm to lull an accusing conscience to repose, and to disarm death of some of his terrors. The opinions they reverence are such as the New Testament rejects as pernicious and destructive; the code of morals which they have formed to themselves, independently of the Gospel, is such as the Christian Legislator never enforced; and Christians of this character are remarkable for nothing so much as a universal departure, both in spirit and conduct, from their great Exemplar.

Among a great variety of causes which have contributed to produce this strange inconsistency and opposition between name and principle, profession and practice, we may reckon the Stage. This enemy has robbed many of the little religion which once distinguished them, and lodged in the hearts of others the strongest prejudices against the practical influence of Christianity. The fashionable religionists of our day are illustrations of the first part of this assertion; and the difficulty which persons, under a powerful conviction of the truth and importance of religion, feel in resigning to its influence their last favourite—the Stage, is a proof of the other part*.

When I hear some fashionable Christians converse, when I behold their conduct in the world, I at once perceive, that the orator on the boards has a far greater influence than the orator in the pulpit; and an attendance on both has produced such an oddity and inconsistency of character, that Adam would scarcely know his offspring; and Jesus of Nazareth must certainly

* Two persons, one an eminently pious minister of the Gospel, and the other an accomplished and excellent female, assured me, when conversing with them on this subject, that previous to their becoming serious, the Stage opposed in their hearts the most powerful barrier to their receiving genuine religion; they thought they could sacrifice every thing to its claims—but the Theatre.

disfranchise them from all the privileges and immunities which will distinguish his genuine followers.

The Theatre, when resorted to by persons who profess to have embraced the Christian religion in its peculiar doctrines and strict morality, soon displays its wonder-working power: Religion quickly resigns the throne to Pleasure; the doctrines of the Cross give place to a less severe and more accommodating system; or if the creed remain unaltered, it loses its practical effect—"The salt has lost its savour;" the peculiar features of the Christian character are gradually softened down till they disappear.

I am aware it will be no easy task to persuade the religious lovers of the Stage that it has produced this effect upon them; for apostasy, from the purity and simplicity of the Gospel is a disease, which, while it strikes every eye besides, is concealed from the miserable patient himself. It was when the church at Laodicea was poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked, that she imagined herself rich and increased in goods. The character of a man is certainly discovered by his pleasures. If a person, professing to be regulated in his spirit and conduct by the pure morality of the Gospel, can be gratified with amusements, which are pursued with avidity by the vicious and the vain, in exact proportion as

he derives pleasure from those amusements, he must be departing from the spirit of Christianity; for Christianity aims to produce a character singular, and every way unlike the character of those who are the abettors of the Sage. If one fashionable amusement more than another be stamp'd with the features of what is called in the Gospel "The world," it is the Theatre. Before a person can seek pleasure from the Drama he must have imbibed much of the spirit of the world: for there every thing is exhibited, and exhibited with plausibility, to which the Christian Lawgiver has said, "Be not conformed." When Christians sanction the Stage, they betray their religion into the hands of the enemy; and Christianity is more effectually injured by these, its pretended friends, than by the open attacks of the most hostile and inveterate of its avowed adversaries. To such Christians I would recommend consistency, and advise them never to absent themselves from the Theatre when the play-bills announce for performance—"The Hypocrite."

The Stage has operated against Christianity two ways:—its morality has always been a morality diametrically opposite to the morality of the Gospel, and consequently it produces an antichristian character:—it has also vitiated the taste by raising the passions above their proper

tone, and thus inducing a dislike and aversion to grave and serious subjects, which have nothing to recommend them but their simplicity and importance.

CHRISTIAN MORALITY AND THE MORALITY OF THE STAGE CONTRASTED.

The sublime morality of the Gospel has excited the admiration, if not the love, of all mankind: even infidels, who proudly contemn the Christian faith, have paid their reluctant homage to that system of morals which the genius of Christianity has revealed, and which by its sanctions it inculcates and maintains. This morality has indeed renounced the spurious virtues of a depraved world; it calls nothing good but that which really is so in the nature of things; it perplexes and renders ridiculous many terms in the Nomenclature of moral science, invented by mere philosophers and poets; and that which conduces not to the happiness of man as an individual, or a social being, however specious its appearance, it despises and condemns. In this it is singularly indifferent to the prejudices and sentiments of mankind; it neither courts their admiration, nor deprecates their censure:—as the instructor of a world, its tone is dignified and firm. Its system is open

to the inspection of all, but it accommodates its principles and injunctions to none. What is good it enjoins: what is evil, and even that which has the appearance of evil, it forbids.

The morality of the Gospel is strict but necessary, and is austere to those only who are vitiated and destitute of its spirit. It is an unerring guide in every path, and in every situation of life; to the children of men it kindly speaks, and its language is, "This is the way, walk ye in it." This is the only infallible Mentor: other self-appointed instructors will present themselves on the road, assuming the garb, and sometimes the language, of Christianity: but of these we are commanded, to beware; their steps lead down to death. But it not unfrequently happens that the enemy of man is caressed as his friend, and welcomed by general consent to the heart. We should however recollect, that it may not be virtue which the multitude applauds, and that he is not the sincerest friend who is the most insinuating, and who boasts of his qualifications. The sentiments of what is called a Christian public, are not always to be regarded as Christianity. The subtle writer who, to restore the moral constitution, mingles sweet poison with his medicine, is a quack in ethics, and, like all empirics, kills where he ought to cure. And from what is known of the

human heart, no man, who avails himself of such a method of doing good, will ever succeed; he departs from the genius and spirit of Christianity. He who consults the public taste, and who would conciliate the depraved passions which lurk in the bosom, in order to convey instruction to the mind, will destroy his pupils: to every grain of virtue conveyed in this dangerous vehicle, there must be an ounce of destructive vice. Now such a Pretender to moral science, when contrasted with the Gospel, is the Stage.

The Gospel is moral in every view, and every way hostile to sin. The Stage dazzles with a few specious qualities, which are greatly exceeded by entire characters of disgusting vice. Sometimes indeed the midnight horror of iniquity experiences a momentary illumination by a solitary flash of virtuous sentiment; but even its best sentiments are tainted; and when compared with the Gospel retire into nothing, or worse than nothing; while its counterfeit virtues, and real vices, are fatally destructive to morals and to man.

The ascendancy of the passions over reason—the perversion of reason by inherent depravity, is the fruitful source of all human misery. To destroy this ascendancy—to sanctify the passions—and to impart a holy principle to reason,

is the object and the aim of Christianity:—its doctrines, its precepts, the sublime example which it proposes, all and equally tend to restore man to holiness and happiness. Thus every thing in the Gospel is directly opposed to pride and ambition, to anger and revenge, to levity and wantonness: every page of this invaluable book inculcates humility and contentment, condescension and meekness, sobriety and chastity; a spirit of fervent pity breathes from the alpha to the omega of the New Testament; and its leading fundamental principle is—“Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” The man whose life is regulated by Christianity acknowledges God in all his enjoyments, and submits to his equitable government without murmur or complaint in the hour of suffering and distress. Now let a person who has read the Gospel till its spirit is all his own—till its principles are deeply rooted in his soul—let such an one enter the Theatre, our modern school of virtue; and if it were possible to detain him there during the performance of one evening, what would be his sensations—what the compunction of his heart—that he had ever passed the unhallowed threshold of this sanctuary of folly and delusion! How would he blush for human nature, and weep at the

awful depravity of these boasted instructors of mankind*!

* Some perhaps will censure, while others will commend, my introducing here the following quotation: but it is connected with the subject, and certainly has a tendency to produce a beneficial effect on the minds of those who are in the habit of visiting the Theatre. It is extracted from a sermon of Mr. Love, a clergyman of Scotland, who once preached in Artillery-lane, London; the sermon is entitled, "The radical Cause of National Calamity;" and had Britain listened to that warning voice, the portentous cloud which is ready to burst over our devoted heads might, perhaps, have passed away.

"At the Theatre, when all is sunk in haughty forgetfulness of God; after the proud have once more displayed their brilliancy, and 'set their heart as the heart of God;' after the eyes of vanity have, for the last time, feasted themselves; after the tears which real guilt and misery demanded, have been wasted on fictitious crimes and calamities, and the whole crowd hath been shaken with the madness of laughter; after profaneness hath unfurled its flag of defiance, with hell-bred gallantry setting at nought the name of the Most High, the tremendous operations of Providence, and the terrors of the bottomless-pit; after obscenity hath swallowed down its morsel of elegant filthiness; let a celestial spirit shine forth, eclipsing the luminaries of the place, and scattering round those terrors which were once felt at the Sepulchre of Jesus of Nazareth; and in such strains as these let his voice announce the hastening doom:— 'Worms of the dust, enemies of the eternal God! you have long been the abhorrence of the inhabitants of heaven; you have disdained to seek Jesus, who was crucified; the divine sorrows, the pure delights, which his spirit creates in repenting souls, you have rejected—you have treated with derision; now the day of your visitation expires. I swear by him that liveth for ever and ever, you shall have time no longer!' Then let trembling rock the ground; let the fabric and its miserable assem-

A brief review of one of the most celebrated theatrical productions, and the least exceptionable of any I have read, will evince the truth of the above remarks, and be a sufficient apology for their severity.

Comedy is in its nature so contemptible, and the "Stuff" of which it is made so disgusting to a mind of common dignity, that its plots, its follies, and what some are pleased to call, its good-humoured vices, shall not pollute my page. Love, intrigue, prodigality dressed in the garb of generosity, profaneness dignified with the name of fashionable spirit, seduction and adultery, mere peccadillos in these days of refinement, are all materials which the comic muse combines and adorns to please and instruct her votaries. More pernicious to the moral constitution than is hellebore to the natural, are the seductive plays imported from Germany. The Pizarro of Kotzebue is levelled at Christianity, and, like our Humes and our Gibbons, its author has purchased to himself indelible disgrace, by

ably roll down the opening chasm; and let the croud of dislodged spirits behold the majestic, unveiled, flaming countenance of their Judge. Would such vengeance be too severe?—Let us not presume to say that it would; rather let us wonder that, amidst ages of provocation, such tokens of wrath have not appeared; and if our impenitence is still continued, let us think with awe for what solemn catastrophe such a people as we may be reserved."

making Jesus of Nazareth the author and instigator of crime. The Virgin of the Sun is exceptionable on another ground; and the mother that could suffer her daughters to read it in the closet, much more behold it at a Theatre, must be the monster of her species, and the deliberate murderer of female virtue in the person of her own offspring. I would, but I dare not, transcribe a passage which is entitled to pre-eminent infamy—my soul revolts, and I commit the detested copy to the flames.—‘Twas an act of justice:—my heart is at ease. I will now go on.

I shall not be accused of partiality in my selection from the English Drama, if I offer a few strictures on the TRAGEDY OF DOUGLAS. This is reckoned one of our best theatrical performances; its morality has been highly applauded, and it is written by a clergyman.—But its principles are antichristian. Its author, one of the angels of the Scottish church, if he ever understood the Gospel, is fallen like Lucifer, son of the morning. There are in this production some vestiges of an acquaintance with Christianity—but ah, how mutilated!—how changed! And if the religion of his sermons inculcate the morality of his tragedy, his unfortunate hearers, if they admire and approve, will be any thing but Christians.

As a dramatic composition, this tragedy is

entitled to considerable praise; it is well conducted; the style is elegant, and in the highest degree it is interesting: but in a moral point of view, and with regard to its aspect on Christianity, it is exceedingly dangerous.

The first speech of Lady Randolph has a fault which no Christian writer ought to commit; she concludes her soliloquy by a reflection on "Fate." But is Fate the God we worship? There are many excellent traits in the character of this heroine of the piece:—she feels as a mother; but she talks not, she acts not, like a Christian; yet she is held up to the audience as a character to be admired and imitated. A clandestine marriage is the cause of her misfortunes: but she is not blamed for this act of imprudence. Her father was not consulted, but deceived:—she indeed laments the deception, but does not repent of her romantic love. In relating her story to Anna she refers again to "ruling Fate;" and as she advances, in the spirit of dissatisfaction, and as if in contempt of Providence, she upbraids the God of Heaven for afflicting her:—

"mighty heaven,

What had I done to merit this affliction?"

Does this resemble him who said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord?" But what has a fictiti-

ous character on the Stage to do with Heaven? How shameful this solemn appeal in such circumstances, and how dreadfully impious the sentiment;

Again: hear this Amazon breathing a martial spirit, exalting the trade of arms above the shepherd's humble useful walk.

———" what does my Anna think
Of the young Eaglet of a valiant nest?
How soon he gaz'd on bright and burning arms;
Spurn'd the low dunghill where his fate had thrown him,
And tower'd up to the region of his sire."

Here is a sentiment which Christianity abhors; but it appears to be a favourite with our Christian divine, for he has more than once introduced it with approbation. The feudal spirit animates him, and the peasantry, the strength and glory of a country, the sinews of a state, are in his view the refuse of the dunghill; while the barbarous love of arms exalts its possessor to another, and a higher rank of being. This high told rant may gratify the Scottish pride of ancestry, and may be sweet music in the ear of the haughty baron; but the Gospel knows nothing of a natural inequality of mankind. And, if to be born with the savage spirit of war, and with a thirst for blood, be a proof of inherent dignity, the Tyger of the woods claims the precedence, and is superior to the most distinguished heroes

that ever Scotland knew. But listen: this Christian lady is at her devotions: hear her prayer:

“Oh thou all righteous and eternal king,
Who Father of the fatherless art call'd,
Protect my son! Thy inspiration, Lord,
Hath fill'd his bosom with that sacred fire,
Which in the breasts of his forefathers burn'd;
Set him on high, like them, that he may shine
The star and glory of his native land.”

Pride, ambition, revenge, the love of glory, all which Christianity is intended to extirpate from the human breast, and which have been the bane and misery of man, are here traced to a source which makes me shudder:—the inspiration of Jehovah hath fill'd her son's breast with the SACRED fire of these unhallowed passions! What page of the New Testament warrants any of its votaries to adopt such sentiments? St. James would never have addressed such a prayer to the God of Heaven:—“Whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not of your lusts?” was his opinion on the subject. What I have hinted before, the awful profaneness of such appeals to heaven from an actress on the Stage, must chill every pious breast with horror. What daring impiety! A Christian divine is determined to write a tragedy, and, for the sake of stage effect, he ventures to make the ETERNAL GOD one of the dramatis personæ; and calls him ever

and anon to sanction pride, to smile on ambition, to lend his authority, and stamp with dignity a fiction—a lie. Frequent instances of this shocking impiety occur in the tragedy of Douglas.

But Lady Randolph, with whom the audience is made to sympathize, and who is the most virtuous heroine that ever figured on the Stage, is brought at last to crown her piety and her virtue with suicide. Unable longer to sustain the shock of adversity: deprived of every earthly comfort; and as if the consolations of that Heaven in which she is made to trust were suspended, she closes her career by self-murder.

“such a son,
And such a husband drive me to my fate.”

The other characters of this piece are equally exceptionable; their morality cannot bear the severe test of the Gospel. Lord Randolph and Douglas are exhibited to be admired; but this would be a miserable world, if mankind were to imbibe the spirit and temper of these personages. Prompt to revenge an injury; proud and ambitious in the highest degree; impatient of restraint; and deadly in their hate, are these instructors of a Christian audience. Douglas dies, acknowledging that he only wished to live to run the career of glory and to be admired. There is a scene in his life, where the audience are made to

catch the spirit of duelling, and almost to regret that the sword was not drawn to avenge a private wrong. His leaving the house of his reputed father as an adventurer, is not mentioned as a fault, though his sudden departure wrung the old man's heart with anxiety and sorrow. In the eye of the author this boy has no defect; and he undoubtedly intended him as a model for our British youth. The whole tragedy is well adapted to make them warriors, duellists, and suicides. But the self-denying virtues of Christianity; that benevolence which embraces the whole human race as one family; that controul over our own spirit; that disposition to forgive injuries, and to do good to those who despitefully use us; that fervent zeal to live to the glory of God; that acquiescence in his will, in every situation of trial and affliction; all of which are the distinguishing features of Christian morality, they will never learn from Douglas, nor from any other theatrical performance that was ever received with approbation on the Stage. Indeed, Christian virtue, or the Christian character drawn to the life, wholly complete in every part, would not please, but disgust a mixed audience:—and the reason is obvious; those who refuse to welcome true religion to their hearts, must have their aversion to it subdued before they can be pleased with seeing it on the Stage.

Christianity aims to complete the moral cha-

racter, and acknowledges none as its votaries till they renounce every sin. The Stage fixes on one or two amiable qualities, which cannot be considered as virtues, to atone for a thousand follies and a thousand crimes. And it is remarkable, that on the Stage those qualities only are applauded, which a man may possess while he is entirely destitute of religion; and others too are commended which he ought not, which he cannot possess if he be a real Christian. If a character be frank, open generous, and brave, he has, according to the Vocabulary of the Stage, "A good heart." He may be an adulterer, a libertine, a despiser of God, and a trampler on his laws, and these are only human frailties.

Will it not then be acknowledged with universal conviction, that the morality of the Stage, and the morality of the Gospel, are irreconcilably at variance; that there is little, if any thing, in common between them; and that in proportion as the one advances in the formation of character, an effectual barrier is opposed to the influence and success of the other?

The Stage is a miserable school for the conduct of life; its most finished character is the slave of passion, the creature of the moment, without capacity or inclination to perform the most essential duties which are required of him as a social being. The good man of the Theatre,

who receives the plaudits of a Christian audience, is not a Christian; his principles are taught in a seminary where Christ has no authority, and are directly opposite to those which Christianity would implant in the breast. It is a maxim with him, that present gratification is to be preferred to suffering virtue; that ambition is superior to contentment; that pride is necessary to carry a man with decency through the world; that resentment is manly spirit; and patience of injuries, meanness and degradation. Such, with respect to the conduct of life, is a character formed by the Stage. And the objects which the Theatre instructs its votary to pursue, are as anti-christian as the principles which it would recommend. It is said of the Christian, that he lives in the present world—"As seeing him who is invisible:" he considers himself as a stranger and traveller, whose goal is immortality, and whose reward is the approving smile of heaven: he pursues an incorruptible treasure, and proclaims himself to be the Denizen of a city whose builder and maker is God.

— "the high-born soul

Disdains to rest her heav'n-aspiring wing

Beneath its native quarry."

The degraded pupil of the Stage, on the contrary, has no prospects beyond the limits of mor-

talities; his horizon is the grave; his schemes are all "Earthly, sensual, or devilish;" the highest precept of his instructor is—"Live while you live." What Foster beautifully declares of elegant literature, is strikingly applicable to the best theatrical productions which are exhibited on the Stage, with all the pomp of scenery, gesture, and action. The Theatre "Does not instruct a man to act, to enjoy, and to suffer, as a being that may to-morrow have finally abandoned this orb; every thing is done to beguile the feeling of his being a stranger and pilgrim on the earth." The Stage "Endeavours to raise the groves of an earthly paradise, to shade from sight that vista which opens to the distance of Eternity."

So completely a man of this world is the hero of the Theatre, that if disappointment, which is the common lot of humanity, overtake him, he is inconsolable; and as if his fortune and happiness were forever wrecked, he mourns that "The Everlasting has fixed his canon 'gainst self-murder;" or, forgetting entirely that there is an Almighty Being or a future state, he ends with his own hands what he fondly hopes is the whole of his existence. This method of closing the earthly scene, is peculiar to him who makes this world all important, and who is regardless of another. The very tendency of the Theatre leads to this:—having confined ob-

jects worthy of pursuit to a present state, it teaches—that want of success is the loss of every thing; and that a man, whom the world and benignant Fortune disown, has no business with life.

The pleasures of a character formed by the Theatre, are such as Christianity forbids, and which to the Christian are insipid and disgusting.

These two beings seem to be cast in a different mould: THAT of which the one speaks with rapture, upon which he reflects with satisfaction, and to the repetition of which he looks forward with delight, is to the other nauseous; he rejects it “With hatefullest disrelish,” and avoids it as the minister of pain. The pursuit of both is happiness; but in what different paths is it sought by each! and how opposite the sources from whence it is derived! I know of no worse purgatory to a man whose character the Stage has formed, than to be doomed to converse and associate with a real Christian. Place an individual of this description beside the seraphic John, or holy Paul; let them both disclose the sources of their enjoyments, the objects which in the possession afford them pleasure, and the anticipations that charm them with the delights of hope, and you will at once perceive that every thing is dissimilar and opposite:—the Apostle views his companion with pity and concern; the

companion regards the Apostle with wonder and contempt.

It may perhaps be urged, that without the influence of the Theatre, every man destitute of religion would be equally averse from the conduct, the pursuits, and the pleasures of the Christian. That the depravity of the human heart is a decided foe to exalted, scriptural piety, is undoubtedly true; but it is possible surely to mature the seeds of vice, to increase the natural enmity of the human mind against the Gospel, by arming it with prejudice, and deluding it with error. This is effectually done when the world creates its instructor, and becomes its own law-giver; when it establishes a school where mankind are flattered into a persuasion, that the human heart, without the salutary, transforming influence of religion, is the seat of virtuous principle; that sufferings, which are the consequences of guilt, may be considered as an atonement for crime; and that he who has lived imperfectly virtuous, even according to its own system of virtue, while his heart is estranged from God, may, nevertheless, confidently expect the mercy of heaven. Clothed in this Panoply furnished by the Stage, the heart is assailed by Christianity in vain; for it is the Stage that inculcates doctrines like these, and impresses their characters indelibly on the Soul. Man is naturally pleased

with the teacher that prophecies good concerning him, while he turns away with aversion from the less accommodating instructor, who, fearless of consequences, would force upon him unwelcome truth; and the more he is captivated by the one, his prejudices are increased and strengthened against the other.

No one, I think, will seriously deny, that a man who has imbibed the general sentiments which are enforced on the Stage, is a more decided enemy to pure, unsophisticated Christianity, than he who has never yielded to its influence; for though the latter may be depraved, and consequently averse from vital religion, yet his heart is not fortified with the prejudices of error. And whatever opposition is to be subdued by the Gospel previous to its complete triumph over him, it has not to contend with the impressions of a theatrical character. It has no ingenious sophistry to unravel, no enchanting visions to disrobe of their fallacious beauty, no dazzling, yet destructive principles of action to eradicate.

To err in our ideas of moral obligation, and the nature and extent of moral science, is fatal to individual and social happiness. Such error is a formidable opponent to Christianity—it makes us miserable and keeps us so. Yet, the Stage is the school where pure morality is mutilated,

tarnished, and perplexed; where precept and example combine their influence to form a character whose every feature Christianity must efface before it can be admitted into the heart. In proportion, therefore, to the moral influence of the Stage, must be the sum of human wretchedness. That this influence operates strongly against Christianity, will appear from another view of the subject.

THE STAGE RAISES THE PASSIONS ABOVE THEIR PROPER TONE, AND THUS INDUCES A DISLIKE TO GRAVE AND SERIOUS SUBJECTS, WHICH HAVE NOTHING BUT THEIR SIMPLICITY AND IMPORTANCE TO RECOMMEND THEM.

The Gospel is simple and grave; it rejects with indignation the foreign aid of ornament; to recommend itself to the world, it depends on nothing but its own intrinsic excellence. The enticing words of man's wisdom, the finesse of oratory, the rich attire, the modern drapery, in which some advocates of "Pulpit eloquence" would fain invest divine truth, are but the efforts of imbecility to adorn a theme, whose dignity is plainness, whose nature is simplicity. The Theatre and theatrical productions are just the reverse of this; and an attendance on the Stage has, in this view, been greatly prejudicial to Christianity. The Stage, as its doctrines and precepts are congenial with the frame and dis-

position of the human heart, as it nourishes, or at best but refines the degeneracy of our depraved nature, so there is every thing in its manner to fascinate, to allure, to impress the Soul. The passions, our treacherous enemies, are touched by the scenes of the Drama, and bewilder and delude the understanding.

Poetry, music, action, oratory, all enlisted in the cause of fiction, combine their influence to draw off the mind from the simple and the useful, while a passion for the romantic, the showy, and the splendid, is excited and increased. The soul is elated, and sometimes wound up to rapture, while sentiments are impressed on the mind, which neither time nor occupation will ever efface. The most dangerous effect produced by the Theatre in this view, is, that it absolutely debilitates the mind, and renders it inaccessible by simple, yet everlastingly important truth.—As the powers are raised above their proper tone by artificial impulse, the best instructions conveyed in a different method are nugatory and vain. What the ingenious Mr. Knight has said of the passion for Romances and Novels, is strikingly true of the Stage—it produces “A sickly sensibility of mind, which is equally adverse to the acquisition of useful knowledge and sound morality.” The passions which guard the avenues to the understanding, have received a kind of

stupor, from which nothing but theatrical power can rouse them. A weak stimulus will not act after one that is more powerful. Thus sentiments however pernicious and destructive to the moral character and to happiness, received at the Theatre, continually deepen their impression on the Soul, till they are absolutely indelible:—they become the inseparable attendants on consciousness, and the individual must forget himself to lose these, his constant companions. If his mind ever ask for new ideas: if, not satiated with what it already has attained, it longs for more, he must visit the Theatre:—reading is insipid, except a novel relieve the tedious interval; conversation for improvement is dull and uninteresting; nothing can seize his attention powerfully but the Drama.

It is said of Sir Matthew Hale, “That he was an extraordinary proficient at School, and for some time at Oxford; but the Stage Players coming thither, he was so much corrupted by seeing plays, that he almost wholly forsook his studies. By this he not only lost much time, but found that his head was thereby filled with vain images of things; and being afterwards sensible of the mischief of this, he resolved, upon his coming to London, never to see a play again, to which he constantly adhered.”

If then a love for the Stage unfit the mind for

the acquisition of useful knowledge which has no connexion with religion, how seriously hostile must it be to Christianity! I knew a young man so bewitched by the Theatre, that he felt an absolute incapacity to read the most interesting productions in Science and Theology. "Around this enchanted spot (said he to a friend) I lingered long, till its fatal influence had nearly beguiled me of my salvation; I thought the Gospel insipid, and lessons of morality insufferably disgusting; and had not the powers of the world to come roused me from this moral lethargy, Christianity would have continued my aversion, and the Stage my idol." The indignant eloquence of the Abbe Clement will also assist me here. The Theatre, say its advocates, informs and relieves the mind. "Yes, if to make all useful reading insipid; to withdraw the mind, by an indescribable and secret charm, from every serious and important occupation; to deprave the taste, by exciting an insurmountable aversion to simplicity, and an exclusive admiration of the marvellous; and to debase the feelings, by destroying all sense of gratification but in the most violent agitations of the soul:—if this be to inform the mind, the argument is irresistible. My friends, this description is not overcharged, you know that it is not; you know that these are the effects of the best regulated Stage." To live in fairy land, and

to converse with fiction, is charming; but it has the same effect on the intellectual and moral constitution as opium on the natural. There are pleasures in madness which only madmen know; but what rational being would envy the maniac his joys? And if fiction and the Stage rob us of sober truth and reasonable pleasure; if, when we break from their influence, we are left without consolation, and without hope, shall we yield to their enchantment, or suffer ourselves to be carried away by such delusory vanities? When their fatal tendency is considered; when we reflect, that subjects, the most essential and important, fail to impress a theatrical mind; that religious and moral improvement can never be attained, while we accustom ourselves to the pleasures of the Stage, shall we for a moment hesitate which to abandon.

The most preposterous inconsistency marks that man's character, who, while he pretends to venerate Christianity, can admit for a moment the opposing claims of the Theatre. Irreconcilable enemies cannot be seated on the same throne; and the love of vital religion cannot exist in the heart that feels the remotest approach to a theatrical passion. That the Stage is in every view hostile to the Spirit and influence of Christianity, is a question which may soon be decided by an impartial examination of the New

Testament, and those theatrical productions which have allured and deceived the world.

My views of the Gospel, may, perhaps, be condemned by some as unreasonably strict and severe; yet, I think, if the Christian Lawgiver be deemed infallible, and if the system of morals which he has made known be admitted without mutilation or change, objections on this ground will vanish into air. Those who consider the New Testament as the standard and the source of evangelical and moral truth, must acknowledge that I have only copied from the great original; that the "Sermon on the Mount," and the hortatory eloquence of Paul, are in perfect unison with that delineation of Christian Ethics which I have feebly made; between which and the Theatre there is the widest difference, and the greatest opposition.

By suffering the Gospel to speak out its claims, by exhibiting its native characters, without reference or regard to the sentiments and prejudices of mankind, I am conscious of having exposed myself to the charge of fanaticism. The accommodating moralist and the fashionable divine, will each depart from his usual softness, and, with the unpoliteness of vulgar censure, consign me to infamy. But this is nothing new; it is no uncommon thing to affect to despise that to which we have no disposition to conform. Accordingly, pure, unsophisticated Christianity

has ever been held in derision by those whose conduct it censures, and whose principles it condemns. "The world is not its friend, nor the world's law." And its advocates must expect to share in the obloquy which it is doomed to suffer. But let no man shrink from a firm and dignified avowal, that he is the friend, the admirer, the champion, of a system which is divine.—Unmov'd by censure or applause, the cause he should consider as every thing. Secure in the approbation of conscience, the opposition of men he should cheerfully sustain, or nobly disregard.

I pity the man whose passion for fame leads him to court the approbation of his fellow creatures, at the expense of their virtue; who thrusts Christianity into the shade, when it ought to occupy the throne; or, if he bring it forward at all, so softens its features, so transforms its character, that it becomes the creature of a depraved mind, rather than the infinitely pure system of a Divine Author. Let it never be forgotten that it is altogether out of the character of Christianity, to act a subservient, or accommodating part; she must be invested with absolute authority, or she is in fact disregarded and despised.

If Christianity, therefore, be the religion of our choice, our amusements, and our amusing instructors should be conformed to its nature, and pervaded by its spirit. Conscious that in

this reasoning there is some force, Christians who plead for the Stage have fallen into a dangerous error; they have disfigured and tarnished the pure, immaculate robe of Christianity, while they have bedizened the vest of Thalia with ornaments and beauties which it never possessed but in their imagination. And, thus, when the Gospel is "Shorn of its beams," and the Stage arrayed in borrowed, adventitious glories, a sort of resemblance is artfully produced between them.

It not a little surprised me, that such a writer as Knox should evidently sanction the Theatre, that he should commend in the gross (for he has not discriminated) the MORAL tendency of the Plays of Shakspeare, Otway, and Rowe.

After having "Entered into all the feelings" of these writers, when we have "Assimilated with their souls," let us take up the volume of truth and righteousness; and we must certainly acknowledge that however gratifying it may be, to feel with the Drama, it is not Christian feeling; it is something the very reverse, which Christianity would suppress, and which Christians therefore ought not to indulge. Yet Dr. Knox is a Christian divine, whose writings in general do honour to his profession*.

* This was written before Dr. Knox printed his Philanthropic Sermon: Literature and Religion should now disown him.

If any men more than others are bound to throw their whole weight of influence into the scale opposite to the Theatre, they are CLERGYMEN, who by profession are sacred teachers of sacred truth. For divines to prostitute their talents by writing for the Stage, is to destroy with one hand what they build with the other: they are vainly attempting to serve two masters of opposite claims, and of characters so essentially different, that if they love the one, they must despise the other. Equally culpable are those who sanction the Theatre by their presence and example. Language cannot reprobate in terms sufficiently strong, the conduct of those "Pliable Priests," who waste their evenings in sauntering about the Theatre; sometimes in the boxes, then in the lobby, and other places of public and indecent resort. Clerical fops, who, "Familiar with a round of ladyships, make God's work a Sinecure." But there are who glory in their shame. Censure is lost upon those who dread no charge so much, as that of being sincerely in earnest in their sacred profession. This would be branding them with infamy indeed. But however long the catalogue of their follies and their crimes, this will never be inserted as one of its items.

CHAP. VIII.

THE STAGE CONSIDERED AS AN AMUSEMENT
ONLY.

HITHERTO I have considered the Theatre as a moral instructor; and though amusement be its primary object I have endeavoured to show, that it must have some influence in the formation of character, and that that influence is decidedly hostile to the best interests of man. But there are advocates of the Stage, who disclaim the idea of its being a teacher, who plead for it as an amusement only. And though I am persuaded that it must be injurious to morals, yet, for the sake of argument, and to show that it cannot be defended on any ground, I will divest it of its character as an instructor, and consider it only in the light in which Shaftsbury pleaded for it, and Rousseau commended it. Shaftsbury declares, “That the Theatre was intended merely for recreation, and that if it have any tendency to improve, the improvement extends only to the art of the poet, and the refinement of taste.” Rousseau, in his System of Education, has a si-

milar remark. "I carry Emilius to the Theatre (says he), not to study morals, but taste; for there it particularly displays itself to those who are capable of reflection. You have nothing to do, I will tell him, with morality here, this is not the place in which to learn it: the Stage was not erected for the promulgation of truth, but to flatter and amuse."

With respect to the improvement of taste and the poetic art by the Drama, whatever the ancients might urge on this head, the moderns surely have nothing to claim. Garrick in vain attempted to discipline the taste of an English audience; he at last relinquished the task in despair, and was heard to say, "That if the public required him to get up for the Stage the Pilgrim's Progress, he would do it." I conceive there is even less to be said in favour of the modern Drama as a standard of taste, than can be advanced in its defence as a school of morals; and in both, it is a severe reflection on our literature and virtue.

As an amusement only, I think the Stage cannot be defended: strip it of its pretensions to taste, and to moral instruction, and it loses every thing:—for as an amusement it is altogether improper. The question naturally presents itself here—What is the nature and end of amusement? And when this is answered, another

immediately follows:—Does the Theatre correspond with this idea; is it calculated to answer this end?

Amusement is recreation, and is intended to relieve the mind from severe attention, or to recruit the animal spirits, by an agreeable suspension of bodily labour. Man is formed for exertion; his circumstances in general require activity; but weariness and fatigue are the consequence of a proper, and becoming attention to the business and duties of life. The mind must sometimes relax—the body cannot always exert its energies. But it is injurious to the intellectual powers, and to the animal constitution, to suffer an immediate transition from busy employment to perfect idleness. We naturally ask for recreation, something that will assist the mind pleasingly to unbend; that will enliven and exhilarate the spirits, and thus prepare us for the return of occupation, and qualify us to enter upon it with new energy.

It is necessary that our amusements should be suited to our pursuits. The student and the man of science should recreate himself with something adapted to the nature of his employment, and which at the same time conduces to his health. Exercise, light reading, social converse, are all sources of pleasure and recreation to the student; and if he be not fastidious they are all

he requires. The man of business, after his mind has been wearied by its cares, and his body fatigued, if he have a rational taste, will retire into the bosom of his family; or if he be not blest with the endearments of domestic life, he will certainly recreate and enliven his spirits by innocent diversion; he will studiously avoid every thing which would violently agitate his frame, which demands the labour of close attention, and which cannot be accomplished but by a waste of time, incompatible with any active employment. Amusement should invigorate, and not exhaust the powers; it should spread a sweet serenity over the mind, and should be enjoyed at proper seasons. Midnight is no time for recreation to a rational being, who lives for any other purpose than to destroy his constitution, and kill time. The amusements of society should never encroach upon its duties, or they defeat their object and become injurious.

It must be perceived that I have hitherto spoken of the amusements of those who are "Useful to their kind;" I have not considered the miserable expedients of fops and fools, by which they endeavour to relieve themselves from the burden of idleness, and the listlessness of having no one important object to engage their attention; and who contrive one folly after ano-

ther, in quick succession, to enable them to pass through life without reflection, and with as little benefit as possible to themselves or others. I pity the contemptible creature who has nothing to do but to get rid of his time; to talk of amusing such a being is a misapplication of words. Amusement is his business; and who will envy him his drudgery, or his toil? He inverts the order of nature; he seems to be happy, but he betrays himself; it is easy to discern, through his apparent gaiety, his real wretchedness:—'tis

“A face of pleasure, but a heart of pain.”

I think it would be a service, which all moral writers would render to mankind, were they to strike off these tiny beings, these animalcula, from the list of rational existence; and therefore I wish it to be distinctly understood, that I consider their example and their claims lighter than air:—they have mistaken the great end of living; and their conduct is one continued aberration from nature, reason, and happiness.

But to return. If the nature and end of amusement be to recreate the mind, and to recruit the strength of those who are performing the duties of life; and if those things only are proper for amusement which have this tendency, it surely will never be urged, in favour of

the Theatre, that it is a suitable recreation for persons of this description and character.

The mind is as much employed, the attention is as strongly seized at the Theatre, as in any of the engagements of active life. Fatigue and weariness are felt as much on quitting the Playhouse as on leaving the Study, the Counting-house, or the Exchange. There is nothing that exhausts us more than the fever of the passions. The tempest of the soul is succeeded by distressing lassitude. After it subsides, we seem deprived of strength; our energies are gone; and it is sometime before the mind recovers its former tone. Now it is notorious, that the Theatre rouses the passions, and agitates the soul. If we attend at all to what is passing before us, we are deeply interested; the real occurrences of life, which involve in them the happiness or misery of individuals, could not impress us more, nor would they so much. One moment we swell with ambition, and the next are fired with revenge; now we tremble with fear, then burn with desire; sometimes we chill with horror, and anon in sympathy, with the imaginary child of woe—

“ Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum.”

The Theatre then, in this view, cannot

reasonably be considered as an amusement. Unless it assume a higher character; unless it answer some moral purpose, it would be preposterous to represent it as recreation for intelligent minds, who wish to unbend and relax, that they may attend with more ability and pleasure to the great object for which they are bound to live.

The hours, the precious hours, too, which are consumed at the Theatre, is another argument against it of great moment. To waste four hours, some of which at least should be otherwise employed by creatures who are accountable to the Supreme Being, and who owe him gratitude and adoration, is defeating the very purpose of amusement: it makes pleasure intrude beyond the precincts of duty: it destroys the peace and order of every well regulated family, and absolutely unfits the mind for performing any thing with vigour through the whole succeeding day. And in addition to these considerations it will not be claimed for theatrical amusement, that it conduces to health. The Rosy Goddess dwells not in the crowded Theatre; but pale Sickness and wan Disease are there seated on an ebon throne, scattering around, with a lavish hand, the fatal seeds of Death.

These are things so obviously striking, that

every reader must acknowledge their force. If persons visit the Theatre, without being at all interested in what is there passing, their apathy and idiocy are features of the clan to which they belong; and to reason with those who are incapable of thought would betray folly almost as disgusting as their own.

CONCLUSION.

THUS, in almost every view in which we can contemplate the Stage, we are struck with its injurious and baneful tendency. Those who defend it as a school of morals can never have seriously examined its character, or traced its influence. It will excite surprise that any man, who professes to be acquainted with theatrical productions, should gravely commend them in the following strain:—"True Tragedy is a **SERIOUS LECTURE UPON OUR DUTY**, shorter than an epic poem, and longer than a fable; otherwise differing from both only in the method, which is dialogue instead of narration. Its province is to bring us in love with the more exalted virtues, and to create a detestation of the blacker and (humanly speaking) more enormous crimes. In Comedy, an insinuating mirth laughs us out of our frailties, by making us ashamed of them. Thus, when they are well intended, Tragedy and Comedy work to one purpose: the one manages us as children, the other convinces us as men." How finely this sounds in theory! But it would surely be kind

in such writers to inform us, in what age these Tragedies, and these well-intended Comedies, were written; and in what part of the world they are acted with approbation and effect. With this charming representation in our minds, let us range through the ancient and modern Drama. But in our researches after this potent fascinating instructor, we shall take even the lamp of Diogenes in vain.

It has been said, in reply to those arguments which maintain the immoral influence of the Theatre, by confident individuals, "We have attended theatrical representations, and escaped the contagion; we have sustained no injury." There are two sorts of persons who may fancy they can adopt this language: the very virtuous, the "Unco guid," who are proof against temptation in its most seductive forms; or those whose vices are so numerous, and so deeply-rooted in the heart, that even the Stage cannot add to their number, or increase their power. With respect to the first, we have only their own testimony in favour of their extraordinary goodness; and what shall we think of the humility and modesty of those who proclaim, that they only, among the children of men, are the persons who can trifle with sin without receiving the least immoral taint? We have heard of a power to charm the adder; but these indivi-

duals have found a drug which will captivate the "Old serpent" himself, and render him harmless. However I doubt their pretensions, I am ready to question that man's virtue who can encourage, by his presence and example, indecent ribaldry, profane swearing, and mock devotion. This is indeed a sort of monstrous virtue, which a man may make a show of; and I know of no place so fit for its exhibition as the Theatre. I would say to these very virtuous persons—though you can rush into the fire, and escape the injury of the flame, yet remember all are not so invulnerable as you; and it is the duty of a virtuous mind to study the good of others. Perhaps the very night of your attendance may be marked in the history of some deluded young person, as the dreadful æra from whence he has to date his everlasting ruin. And, oh horrid to think, you contributed, by your example and your money, to keep open the gates of hell, which, when they close, are to close upon him for ever! The second class, namely, those who are so depraved, so versed in the science of iniquity, that they have nothing to learn from the Stage, are persons with whom I have nothing to do:—they are perhaps incorrigible; and a book on the immorality of the Stage they will never peruse. Those who have no more virtue than their neighbours, who, in an-

evil hour, may be ensnared by vice, or deluded by temptation, will surely be warned of the danger which lurks in every avenue to a Theatre, and which is enthroned on its boards; to them it will be painful to receive impressions which strongly fortify the heart against the Gospel of our Salvation:—and no man, who is not bereft of reason, will court amusement at the expense of purity of conscience, and the rectitude of virtue.

It has often struck me, when meditating on this subject, that could we banish from the Theatre the illusion with which its scenery, the dress, and language of the performers captivate the mind, we should lose all temptation to visit it for amusement.

The apparatus for a Stage is thus humourously described by Rousseau. “Imagine to yourself the inside of a large box, about fifteen feet wide, and long in proportion. This box is the Stage; on each side are placed screens at different distances, on which the objects of the scene are coarsely painted. Beyond this is a great curtain daubed in the same manner, which extends from one side to the other, and is generally cut through to represent caves in the earth, and openings in the heavens, as the perspective requires; so that if any person, in walking behind the scenes, should happen to brush against the

curtain, he might cause an earthquake so violent as to shake—our sides with laughing. The skies are represented by a parcel of bluish rags, hung up with lines and poles, like wet linen at the washerwoman's. The sun, for he is represented here sometimes, is a large candle in a lantern. A troubled sea is made of long rollers, covered with canvas or blue paper, laid parallel, and turned by the dirty understrappers of the Theatre. Their thunder is a heavy cart, which rumbles over the floor. The flashes of lightning are made by throwing powdered rosin into the flame of a link: and the falling thunderbolt is a cracker at the end of a squib. The stage is provided with little square trap-doors, which opening on occasion, give notice that ghosts and devils are coming out of the cellar."

With respect to theatrical exhibitions themselves I can easily conceive; if an individual could be found, whose reason is unbiassed, and whose mind is stored with every kind of knowledge but that which is derived from poets and the gay world, if such an one were told that a number of men and women were maintained for no other purpose than to pretend to make love to, and to pretend to kill one another on a stage prepared for the purpose; that their business was to hold dialogues under fictitious characters, and to feign the most extravagant passions that

ever agitated the human breast, in scenes of the deepest interest; and if he were further told, that multitudes of rational beings would sit hours together to be amused by all this folly; I can easily conceive I say, that he would be, beyond measure, astonished. “Can the persons of whom you speak (he would reply) be dignified with the godlike power of reason? I know not for my part which most to pity,” the poor creatures who are condemned to play the ape for so many hours, or the contemptible beings who voluntarily consent so long to play the fool.”

That Christians ought to abhor the Stage, when they consider it as a TEACHER; and that they ought to despise it as an AMUSEMENT, degrading to the character, and as injurious to the pursuits of immortal beings, will be at once acknowledged. They are obliged to do more than others. If the subject were doubtful—were it a matter of question only, whether the Theatre were lawful to Christians or not, the disciple of Jesus is bound to take the safest side, to avoid the appearance of evil, and to live to the glory of his God. Besides, it is not necessary for him to seek enjoyment abroad in any of the distinguishing vanities of the world. The nearer he approximates to Deity, terrestrial objects lose their glory and their charms. His amusements are the pleasures of religion:—he has what the

Scriptures call "A new heart;" a heart whose affections centre in the All-sufficient Good:—it is formed for celestial joys, and it aspires after the entertainments of Angels. This is its ardent language:—

" My wishes, hopes, my pleasures, and my love,
My thoughts, and noblest passions, are above."

It is with you then, reader, to determine, whether you will renounce Christianity, or the Theatre. Fear not the world, or its " Dread laugh," but choose that wisdom, whose ways are pleasantness, and all whose paths are peace.



APPENDIX:

CONTAINING

STRICTURES ON AN ARTICLE

IN THE FIFTH VOLUME OF

THE ANNUAL REVIEW,

WHICH IS A

CRITIQUE ON THE PRECEDING ESSAY,

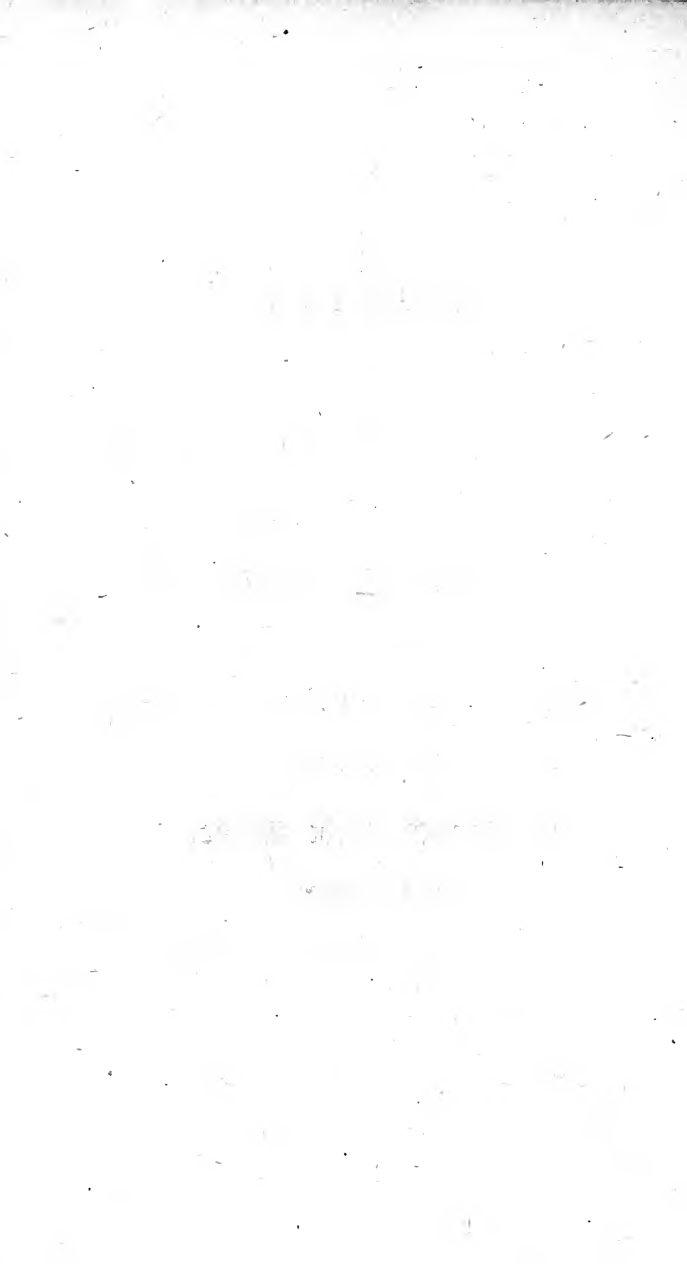
AND AVOWEDLY

A Defence of the Stage.



Judex damnatur cum nocens absolvitur.

Motto to the Edinburgh Review.



APPENDIX,

WHEN an important subject is presented to the public—when it excites attention, and rouses discussion, the friends of truth have reason to rejoice. On this account, I feel peculiarly happy in being called upon to defend the principles and reasonings contained in my *ESSAY ON THE STAGE*; especially when my opponent is a writer in the *Annual Review*; a work to which the name of a responsible editor is affixed, and which has considerable claim to literary distinction. Its principles indeed I have never approved; for its literary department is poisoned with infidelity, and its theological with Socinianism. Yet, as it sustains a respectable character in the republic of letters, its strictures on any subject connected with the interests of morality and religion are worthy of some regard. In this Review I have been honoured with more attention than I had any reason to expect; my insignificant volume has produced a laboured defence of the Stage, and

the most extravagant encomiums on its importance and moral excellence; indeed the writer's zeal seems to have overwhelmed his judgment, and to have hurried him into excesses of literary delinquency, for which the cool, deliberate labours of his future life will scarcely atone; for who will reverence the declamation of ignorance and the extravagance of folly?—Happily for his subsequent fame he is unknown; he has, for this time, escaped; while he has left the avowed editor of the work responsible for all his errors of assertion and fallacies of reasoning.

Reviews in general deserve very little attention. An author may indeed amuse himself with their contradictory reports—with their denunciations and applauses of the same work; but to be seriously affected with the one or the other, would be preposterous folly. It requires little sagacity to discover what kind of treatment a book will receive from the different Reviews. It is sometimes important to inquire by whom a work is published, and you will then almost certainly ascertain by what Reviews it will be praised and blamed: at another time it is desirable to know who and what the author is, and, without reading a page of his book, you may decide as to its fate among the various tribes of critics. Many of our critical Journals are merely booksellers' jobs, conducted by men

whose principles are safely deposited in the Till of their employers, and who, according to their bargain, applaud or condemn.

It is amusing to hear these sons of the quill vaunting of their dignity, and calling themselves magistrates in the republic of letters: their raving reminds us of Bedlam, and its mighty kings of straw: however, we pardon their phrenzy, for perhaps much learning has made them mad*. By no hereditary right—by no elective franchise, do they fill the chair of criticism, yet they assume the lofty tone of legitimate sovereigns, whose will is law; from whose decisions there is no appeal. Bloated with imaginary consequence, they denounce and commend: but if the question be asked, who are these mighty judges of literary pretensions, that proudly decide an author's fate? We soon discover that their censures or applauses are only valuable while they are themselves unknown.

It is not a little mortifying, when we have read the haughty dictates of a literary magistrate, to find that he is some needy adventurer, who perhaps has never written any thing but articles for Reviews, and whose name the booksellers, the Mecænas's of our age, dare not affix to any work which is manufactured under

* I do not here mean the Critical Reviewers; nobody will ever suspect them to be guilty of the sin of knowing any thing.

their patronage: when we consider the characters and qualifications of these self-created censors, well may we ask, in the language of the satirist,

How could these self-elected monarchs raise
 So large an empire on so small a base ;
 In what retreat, inglorious and unknown,
 Did Genius sleep when dullness seized the throne :
 Whence absolute now grown, and free from awe,
 She to the subject world dispenses law ?
 Without her licence not a letter stirs,
 And all the captive criss-cross row is her's.
 The Stagyrite, who rules from nature drew,
 Opinions gave, but gave his reasons too.
 Our great dictators take a shorter way :—
 Who shall dispute what the Reviewers say ?
 Their word's sufficient—and to ask a reason,
 In such a state as theirs, is downright treason.
 True judgment now with them alone can dwell,
 Like church of Rome, they're grown infallible.
 Dull superstitious readers they deceive,
 And knowing nothing, every thing believe !
 But why repine we that these puny elves
 Shoot into giants ?—we may thank ourselves ;
 Fools that we are, like Isr'el's fools of yore,
 The calf ourselves have fashion'd we adore :
 But let true reason once resume her reign,
 This God shall dwindle to a calf again.

Periodical Reviews are now multiplying beyond all precedence in the annals of literature ; and, with a few exceptions, perhaps no time is more unprofitably spent than that which is con-

sumed in the perusal of these superficial productions: they generally contain a mutilated and extremely incorrect statement of the progress of literature, and the claims of particular works. They uniformly contradict each other, and sometimes contradict themselves*. Their constant practice is to address the passions, and the prejudices of men: but seldom do they appeal to their reason and judgment: yet our half-educated fine gentlemen, and our superficial scholars are infinitely indebted to these literary dogmatizers, from them they derive all their knowledge, and their sentiments in conversation are the mere echoes of the last Review, which they repeat in every company till the next month fur-

* A curious instance of this occurs in a modern Review, the most atrocious for literary injustice, as well as the most deficient in literary talent, that has ever disgraced any age or country, whose imposing title, were it not disclaimed by the University, the name of whose city it has unwarrantably assumed, might have deceived some into an opinion that it was not the contemptible thing it really is. From some inexplicable circumstance the same book crept into its pages twice. It is a sermon by a Mr. C——. The first Review of this Sermon coldly and sufficiently commends it; and the author, no doubt, imagining that the Reviewer had now done with him, adorned an advertisement of his sermon with this sprig of praise. But the very day which announced to an admiring world that Mr. C—— had been praised by the Oxford Review, declared also an “unco mournfu” fact: the Oxford Review unblushingly tells the public, that the Sermon, which the month before it had commended, was really below notice!

nishes them with new materials. Whether this is an evil or not I will leave the judicious reader to decide. If Reviews were what they ought, and what they profess to be, the interests of knowledge would certainly be advanced by them. But destitute as these publications generally are of character and principle, their circulation must be injurious. For every man who reads a Review is not acquainted with its secret history, he knows not the degree of credit which is due to its assertions, nor where it is likely to be partial. He reads it probably for information, and not for amusement, and therefore he must often be led to erroneous conclusions, and to make a false estimate of the passing works of the day.

I am sorry that I cannot exculpate the Annual Review from the general charges which I have levelled against most of its contemporaries; yet as in many respects it is greatly superior to nearly all of them, I consider it upon the whole as a respectable adversary: but I hope, when I prove against the individual who wrote the Critique on my Essay, that he is entirely inadequate to the task, that he is rather a tyro than a magistrate, that Mr. Aiken will, in charity to him, and his own reputation, prohibit him from writing in the Annual Review till he is convinced that justice is a virtue, and knowledge and integrity are essential to a reviewer.

For the sake of perspicuity, I shall class my animadversions on this Critique under the following particulars:—false assertions—glaring contradictions—inconclusive reasonings—and unjust censures.

In a critique of a few pages it is not a little remarkable, that a man so very liberal in his censures on another, and who boasts too of “Moral tolerance,” should betray the most palpable ignorance of the subject which he professes to discuss. Ignorance, the more inexcusable because it is issued from the chair of critical legislation.

HIS ASSERTIONS are made without proof, and contrary to fact. I am accused by him of having indulged myself in the wildest, strangest, most untenable, assertions. But this will never be credited after an impartial reader is acquainted with the first paragraph in which he commences his attack. Madam Thalia is infinitely indebted to her knight-errant, he has espoused her cause in the true spirit of Quixotism, and his extravagance of assertion cannot be exceeded. For my part, I cannot help wondering at the temerity of a man who could dare to write such a paragraph as the following, before he had applied the torch to the funeral pile of history, and destroyed the records of the days that are past.

“ An attack on the Stage is alike hostile to public instruction, to public morality, and to public happiness. The Fathers of the Christian church, by conspiring to suppress the Theatres of Greece and Rome, rebarbarized Europe, and condemned the victims of their mischievous tuition to a millenium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe.”

The first assertion, that the Theatre is the school of public instruction, morality, and happiness, may easily be established, or refuted, by the annals of Theatrical history.

The Theatre of Greece, this writer himself denounces as the most licentious of any upon record; he invites me to read through the Ecclesiastical of Aristophanes; I suppose to convince me of the importance of the Grecian stage to public instruction, public morality, and public happiness. Let the greater part of the Dramatic writings of Greece and Rome be examined, and we shall see what kind of instruction they conveyed; and let the effect of a passion for scenic representations be traced in the history of the common wealths where it was indulged, and we shall find the reverse of this author's assertion to be true. The DEFENDERS of the Stage have been the most dangerous enemies of public morals and happiness. The lessons taught by Aristophanes on the Grecian stage absolutely destroyed

all sense of public virtue and decency; and it has been justly observed by Mrs. Moore, "That the profane and impure Aristophanes was almost adored, while the virtue of Socrates not only procured him a violent death, but the poet, by making the philosopher contemptible to the populace, paved the way to his unjust sentence by the judges. Nay, perhaps the delight which the Athenians took in the impious and offensively loose wit of this Dramatic poet rendered them more deaf to the voice of that virtue which was taught by Plato; and of that liberty in which they had once gloried, and which Demosthenes continued to thunder in their unheeding ears. Their rage for sensual pleasure rendered them a fit object for the projects of Philip, and a ready prey to the attacks of Alexander. In lamenting however the corruptions of the Theatre in Athens, justice compels us to acknowledge that her immortal tragic poets, by their chaste and manly compositions, furnish a noble exception. In no country have decency and purity, and, to the disgrace of Christian countries let it be added, have morality, and even piety, been so generally prevalent in any Theatrical compositions as in what—

" Her lofty grave tragedians taught
In chorus or Iambic, teachers best
Of moral prudence."

Yet in paying a just and warm tribute to the moral excellencies of these sublime Dramatists is not an answer provided to that long agitated question, whether the Stage can be indeed made a school of morals. No question had ever a fairer chance for decision than was here afforded. If it be allowed that there never was a more profligate city than Athens; if it be equally indisputable that never country possessed more unexceptionable Dramatic poets than Eschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. If the same city thus at once produced the best physicians and the worst patients, what is the result? Do the Athenian annals record that any class or condition of citizens were actually reformed by constantly frequenting, we had almost said, by constantly living, in the Theatre."

If reforming the world have been the object of the Theatre, no institution has been so singularly unfortunate. This "Academy, where grown persons assemble to study propriety*," has generally taught them a very different lesson.

This writer acknowledges that there are some cases in which the Theatre teaches the grossest and most dangerous immorality; and it is to be observed, that his standard of morals is not very refined, or exalted. Those virtues, which are exclusively Christian, he abandons as little

weaknesses. Yet, according to his very lax code of morals, the Theatre is not always the school in which morality is taught. He confesses that some plays irradiate the suicide of public character; and I suppose he will acknowledge, that Douglas, and several others, irradiate the suicide of private character. But is this, he asks, a formidable evil? Not perhaps to those who believe that death is an eternal sleep. It is also conceded that some comedies soften down adultery; but then this is the excuse furnished for the comic poet. At the time these plays were written, "It had not been discovered in how high a degree domestic happiness and social order depend on conjugal fidelity." But WHY was it not then discovered? and if it is now discovered, why is it that we have daily so many cases of crime; and that those plays on the English stage which soften down adultery are the most popular? And may I not ask, do not these concessions give up the point? What are we to think of a school of morals in which the pupils are as often likely to learn vice as virtue—as often did I say? If this writer will condescend to examine minutely the ancient and the modern Drama, he will find that there are very few plays which teach a pure morality, and that the influence of every Theatre which has hitherto existed, has given a preponderance to the other scale; if he does not

know this, he ought to have known it before he had volunteered his services in its defence. If the Theatre were what this critic would insinuate it to be, every criminal, every licentious play must necessarily be excluded from it: instead of which it furnishes no barrier whatever against performances the most impure. It is notorious that its tendency is directly on the side of vice; and this tendency it is always necessary to check with a strong hand. If the audience will endure licentiousness, the players are ever ready to furnish it; nay, to overstock the market. Yet to attack the Stage is alike hostile to public instruction, to public morality, and public happiness.

But we are informed, "That by conspiring to suppress the Theatres of Greece and Rome, the Christian Fathers rebarbarized Europe, and condemned the victims of their mischievous tuition to a millenium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe."

Here are no less than three gross violations of the truth of history. The Theatre is exhibited as the depository of science—the palladium of liberty—and the source of consolation and joy. The Fathers are accused of rebarbarizing Europe—and it is said that they accomplished this event by suppressing the Theatres of Greece and Rome. May I not fairly retort upon my

adversary, "That it requires no small share of moral tolerance to argue respectfully with a writer who founds his arguments on assertions like these."

By attempting to suppress the Theatre, we are first assured, that the Christian fathers introduced a millenium of ignorance. The Theatre then must have been the depository of science, and it must have been exclusively so. But was it indeed the only light which shone in this dark world? where then was the grove of Plato, and the Lycæum of Aristotle? where the great luminaries of the Heathen world? where the oracles of heaven and the Sun of righteousness? But what are these when compared with the Theatres of Greece and Rome? these indeed continued to shine in all their glory, but in the estimation of this critic, it was a twinkling glory little to be preferred to the blackness of total night. The Theatre was opposed, and a millenium of ignorance stole upon the world. But if we may judge of the past by the present, this sounding gasconade will evaporate. What serious loss should we sustain if all the literature of the English Drama were annihilated? Should we be rebarbarized? If there were not a play in our language, what mighty injury would be the consequence? to the cause of morality and religion it would be a clear advantage; and as for useful knowledge, it never depended upon a

Theatre, nor has ever been beneficially connected with it. And of modern plays, correct taste, and mental dignity are ashamed. The Theatre of our day seems destined to give immortality to Mother Goose, Tom Thumb, and Jack the Giant-killer:—what was formerly the sport of children, is now the amusement of men, and the time when Gog and Magog are to revisit the earth seems to be arrived.*

But we are informed, that a millenium of vassalage was another consequence of the hostility of the fathers to the Theatres of Greece and Rome. The Theatre then must have been the palladium of liberty. But the fact is, what this writer would exhibit as the palladium of liberty was its grave; at least this was undoubtedly true of the Athenian Stage. Pericles took this effectual method to supplant his competitors in the Athenian state, and to secure his own influence, he established a fund from the public money to support the Theatre, and to pay for the admission of the populace, and made it a

* The Mahometans believe, that when Gog and Magog are to come, the race of men will have dwindled to such littleness, that a shoe of one of the present generation will serve them for a house. If this prophecy be typical of the intellectual diminution of the species, judging from the present state of the Theatre we must believe that Gog and Magog may soon be expected.

capital crime to divert this fund to any other service. “ He scrupled not, (says Mrs. Moore) in order to secure their attachment to his person, and government, by thus buying them with their own money, effectually to promote their natural levity and idleness, and to corrupt their morals.” Once inspire a people with a rage for amusement and shows, and they will soon yield up their liberty, and become the vassals of any tyrant, who will thus encircle them with the silken cords of voluptuousness and pleasure. And with regard to the happiness which is diffused by a Theatre, it is imaginary, uncertain and evanescent. The fever of the passions may produce a delirium of joy; but it is only a delirium, and when a man awakes to sober reflection, the phantoms of a Theatre will not charm away the evil spirit. That man is indeed a pitiable object whose happiness depends on the existence of a Theatre.—This however is matter of mere opinion, and if an individual chooses to say that he cannot be happy without the pleasures of the Stage, I will not dispute with him; but I maintain, that if the Theatre were abolished, and there were no other existing causes of woe, the world need not, and would not be miserable. If the Christian fathers therefore, had actually abolished the Theatres of Greece and Rome, Europe by that means would not have been rebarbarized.—It was not the de-

struction of the Theatre that introduced the millenium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe.

But their dark and dismal empire must be ascribed to other persons and other causes. The fathers of the Christian church are guiltless here, and the Theatre might have perished without the extinction of one ray of intellectual light or civil liberty, had not the demons of superstition and priestly power spread over the western continent their raven wing, overwhelming the earth with a darkness more horrible than that of Egypt. The fathers of the church were the enlightened friends of freedom and of man; they forged no chains for the human mind, but they loosed the bands of superstition. They were the apostles of a pure morality. They attempted to allay the fever of the passions, and to restore man to the dignity of reason. They indeed attacked the Stage, because it was hostile to the best interests of humanity; and in this conduct it will afterwards appear this Reviewer justifies them: he acknowledges that Collier and the Abbé Clement, "Aped their anger without their provocation:" yet provoked as they were by immorality and licentiousness, their attempts to suppress those evils condemned the victims of their mischievous tuition to a millenium of ignorance, vassalage, and woe. Not to notice this palpable inconsistency, we

may inquire, is this charge applicable to them in any degree? Did they rebarbarize Europe? Surely not. They had their peculiarities and their infirmities, for they were men. And had the subsequent ministers of the Gospel displayed their faith and purity, the Theatre must have been abolished, but the rays of civilization and science would have shed a divine lustre over the habitable earth.—The reign of barbarism commenced with the papal power, the domination of ecclesiastical over civil government; the establishment of the Pontificate at Rome, with the doctrines of the Holy See, were the sole causes which produced the millennium of darkness, which is here ascribed to the attempts of the Christian Fathers to abolish the Theatres of Greece and Rome.

May we not be permitted to ask, if the destruction of a taste for scenic representations, among the pupils of the Christian Fathers, overspread Europe with intellectual and moral darkness, how was it, that when the Theatre became a favourite amusement in Catholic countries, that it did not pour forth upon them the light of day? To the reformation of Luther we are to ascribe the revival of learning in Europe: that stupendous event, like a tempest, purified the moral atmosphere from the noxious vapours of superstition and ignorance; burst asunder the chains

of vassalage, and introduced new heavens and a new earth. Beholding these astonishing, these happy changes, and remembering the high character which our critic has given the Theatre, we naturally expect that it had some interesting and important share in chasing away the darkness of the night. The Theatre certainly was not inactive, it was extremely zealous, but it was to advocate the cause of ignorance, vassalage, and woe; it was to rivet the chains which Popery had forged. It was, if possible, to cover with contempt the reformation, with its heroic apostle, the immortal Luther. It was not therefore to the Stage Europe was indebted for her happy change of circumstances in the sixteenth century. But on the contrary, that school of instruction of morality and happiness exerted all its powers that darkness and misery might be perpetual.

All historians uniformly mention the Theatre as a mighty engine, in producing the destruction of a refined people. But the emancipation of a people from barbarism, its growth in the liberal arts and useful knowledge, are always ascribed to other causes. None but a half-educated man would have ventured to make such assertions as those which I have now combated. One would imagine, that the Theatre is the only seminary in which this Reviewer has been taught. He calls Tragedy a lecture on history; and he seems to

have studied it in no other school. It is his misfortune: I would advise him seriously to sit down to this important study. I would recommend to him the history of the Christian church, as the first object of regard; and if he would deign to weigh the evidences in favour of Christianity, and to examine, with profound attention, the Christian Scriptures, he might be a better writer, and a better man.

Another false assertion I will notice, and conclude this part of the subject. It is said by this writer, p. 573, that Collier aped the anger of the ancient fathers, without their provocation; in other words, Collier censured the English Stage without reason; his censure was ridiculous because there was no object to excite it. This is only another evidence that the morality of our critic is very accommodating: indeed his virtue so strongly resembles vice, that any man who is not a sophist would confound them together. If Collier was angry without provocation, a virtuous mind may pass through the most nauseous scenes of impurity, which are to be found in the metropolis, with calm unruffled composure. On this subject I will call to my assistance three auxiliaries, men I imagine quite as creditable for knowledge and talents as this zealous advocate of the Stage—Dr. Johnson, Lord Kaimes, and Mr. Cumberland: each testifies that Collier was not

angry without provocation. Speaking of Collier's attack on the Stage, Johnson remarks, "His onset was violent; those passages which, while they stood single had passed with little notice, when they were accumulated and exposed together, excited horror; the wise and the pious caught the alarm, and the nation wondered why it had so long suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be openly taught at the public charge."

Lord Kaimes, referring to the age of Collier, has ventured the following observations, and they are strikingly in point. "The licentious court of Charles the second, among its many disorders, engendered a pest, the virulence of which subsists to this day. The English Comedy, copying the manners of the court, became extremely licentious, and continues so with very little softening. It is there an established rule to deck out the chief characters with every vice in fashion, however gross. But as such characters, viewed in a true light, would be disgusting, care is taken to disguise their deformity under the embellishments of wit, sprightliness, and good-humour, which, in mixed company, make a capital figure. It requires not time nor much thought to discover the poisonous influence of such plays. A young man of figure, emancipated at last from the severity and restraint of a college education, repairs to the

capital, disposed to every sort of excess. The playhouse becomes his favourite amusement; and he is enchanted with the gaiety and splendor of the chief personages. The disgust which vice gives him at first, soon wears off, to make way for new notions, more liberal in his opinion; by which a sovereign contempt of religion, and a declared war upon the chastity of wives, maids, and widows are converted from being infamous vices, to be fashionable virtues. The infection spreads gradually through all ranks, and becomes universal. How gladly would I listen to any one who would undertake to prove that what I have been describing is chimerical! But the dissoluteness of our young people of birth will not suffer me to doubt of its reality. Sir Harry Wildair has completed many a rake; and in the "Suspicious Husband," Ranger, the humble imitator of Sir Harry, has had no slight influence in spreading that character. Of the fashionable women tinctured with the playhouse morals, who would not be the sprightly, the witty, though dissolute Lady Townly, before the cold, the sober, though virtuous Lady Grace? How odious ought those writers to be, who thus spread infection through their country; employing the talents they have from their Maker most traiterously against him, by endeavouring to corrupt and disfigure his creatures! If the Come-

dies of Congreve did not rack him with remorse in his last moments, he must have been lost to all sense of virtue!

The testimony of Cumberland, a writer of plays, much more moral and decent than most of his contemporaries of the same profession, with regard to Congreve and the popular writers of that age, is very characteristic and conclusive.

“ Congreve, Farquhar, and some others, have made vice and villainy so playful and amusing, that either they could not find in their hearts to punish them; or not caring how wicked they were, so long as they were witty, paid no attention to what became of them. Shadwell’s comedy is little better than a brothel.”

I now pass on to an instance or two in which this writer contradicts himself; first premising that in another article, “ Clarkson’s Portraiture of Quakerism,” the Quakers are justified by the Reviewer in prohibiting to their youth the diversions of the Stage, p. 598.

“ They (the Quakers) object to the effects of histrionism upon the moral character of the actor, as necessarily tending to sophisticate him. In this there may be some truth, though probably not much. They object to the usual MORALS of the Drama WITH GOOD REASON. Its false heroism, false honour, false SENTIMENTABILITY

are often abominable; and the custom of making love, the main business, is more mischievous than either." Is it not amusing to contrast with this, the fervid exclamation of my friendly critic:--- "Ye feel not for others, ye care not for the public, who hold such a discipline (attendance at a Theatre) indifferent to the evolution of the sublimest virtues." Gentle reader, do not these reviewers, which are only separated from each other by a few pages, admirably agree? However this is nothing remarkable; this writer can with wonderful adroitness contradict himself.

He informs us in the commencement of his paper, that the Christian Fathers rebarbarized Europe, by endeavouring to suppress the Theatres of Greece and Rome. In p. 571 he tells us, that the Grecian theatre was the most impudent on record: by impudent, he means impure, unchaste, and licentious. In another, p. 573, he justifies the Christian fathers for that opposition which he before condemned. "No such public shows (says he) exist now, as those against which Tertullian, Augustine, Valerius Maximus, and other ancients have left their protest." Either this writer palpably contradicts himself, or he means to assert, that licentiousness, folly, and crime are synonymous with public knowledge, public morality, and public happiness. One more instance of contradiction I shall notice, and

proceed to the inconclusive reasoning of my opponent.

In p. 570 he recommends the Stage, "Because by exhibiting dances and pantomimes, it tends to inspire a taste for graceful exercises, that is, it inflames a passion for dancing." In the very next page, this argument in favour of the Theatre, is rendered of no effect. "Think of the tumult of lascivious ardour which glows panting at every extremity of the frame, during the brisk pulsations, and consentaneous whirls of the embracing dancers. Recollect that in every country, dancing girls form the select basis of the prostitute population; and if you have a wife, sisters, or daughters, hesitate whether you will often encourage or indulge so wanton a delight. "Come then to the Theatre." For what? that you may be inspired with a taste for "These graceful exercises, these consentaneous whirls?" All this is very consistent, and worthy the advocate of such a cause.—But let us now attend to the arguments by which the Theatre is defended.

"The Stage, we are informed, is a succedaneum for neglected education; it is the academy where grown persons assemble to study propriety." This is gratuitous assumption, and rather forms a serious objection against the Stage, than an argument in its favour.—For who are the persons to be instructed? Those who have grown into

life without having learnt propriety of behaviour; those whose education has been defective.—Now persons of this description are usually confined to the lower orders of society; persons whose education is just suited to their avocations and pursuits, and who can derive no possible advantage from the instructions which are conveyed at a Theatre, but who, on the contrary, would be worse for such mending. The ignorant, the vulgar, and the empty-minded, the hopeful pupils in this school of public virtue, are to be exalted into tragic heroes, to talk fustian, and to be unfitted for their sober and legitimate employments; and as they are excluded from fashionable circles, they are to be taught to ape fashionable manners, as they are extravagantly exhibited in genteel comedy. Is not this a very powerful argument against the Stage, that it tends to make a very useful branch of the community dissatisfied with their humble condition; that it inspires them with an ambition to be what they are not, and what they were never intended to be by the God of Providence. Scholars and gentlemen are previously and completely educated before they enter into life. In this respect the Theatre can be of no advantage to them. And to all the rest of mankind it must be an evil of considerable magnitude. Tragedy is nothing better than romance, and cannot be depended on as

historical truth; and if comedy exhibit the manners of fashionable life, it exhibits its follies and its vices too; and if it be desirable to extend the boundary of these, the Theatre is certainly an admirable school for the purpose.

But we are told, "That it is at the Theatre the selfish feelings learn their insignificance, and the generous their beauty. In cases of collision between personal and general interest, the public wish must be that any one should sacrifice himself to the rest. Hence the will of multitudes is naturally virtuous and philanthropic. It is only from ignorance of what is for the universal good, that their praise is bestowed upon hurtful conduct. A habit of deference for the instinctive sentiments of a playhouse audience is likely to operate beneficially and to invigorate the good inclinations. Some persons grow up benevolent who are also recluse; but they will commonly be found to place merit in forwarding the ends of a sect or party, distinct from the common service of mankind. The Theatre breaks in upon such prejudices, and unfolds to the philanthropist the natural claims of society, the comprehensive sympathies of human nature, the feelings of unsophisticated man." I imagine the writer conceived this to be a very fine piece of reasoning: it is indeed so subtle, that not one in ten of a playhouse audience would be able to

comprehend it. How it is that the Theatre unfolds to the philanthropist the natural claims of society, it is not in my power to conceive, any more than would a lord mayor's show, or any popular spectacle which would convene a multitude.

To teach a philanthropist benevolence, is also perfectly gratuitous; if the Theatre indeed could transform the character of a miser, there would be this one solitary ground on which it might be defended: but covetousness, like the dramatic mania, is an incurable disease. "It is a curious, and rather an uncommon notion, that the will of multitudes is naturally virtuous and philanthropic. But I imagine, in support of this assertion, the Reviewer will refer us to the internal history of revolutionary France, when the will of the multitude was law. Or to our theatrical annals, in which it will appear that praise is almost uniformly bestowed on hurtful conduct. But this probably may arise from invincible ignorance, which even this school of morals cannot subdue.

The instinctive sentiments of a playhouse audience, are the instinctive sentiments of a depraved heart. They can sympathize with an adulteress, and laugh at a debauchee: ribaldry is their diversion, and profaneness their sport. And the generosity which is acquired at a playhouse, is an indiscriminate extravagance, the effect of mere feeling

without principle. I suppose Howard never visited a Theatre to learn benevolence; nor have the philanthropic friends of religion, which are to be found in the various sects and parties of the Christian church, been at all the less insensible to the comprehensive sympathies of human nature by not witnessing on the Stage the feelings of unsophisticated man. The most active friends of the abolition of the Slave Trade, were those who perhaps never entered a Theatre;* and their unwearied exertions in promoting this glorious object, could not be to forward the views of a sect or party, distinct from the common service of man. And it is a question worthy of discussion, whether such a thing as pure, disinterested benevolence is to be found among the numerous supporters of a licentious Stage, who must be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

I cannot forbear quoting a strange rhapsody, in which my opponent is pleased to take the other side of the question, and by his own concessions to invalidate all his former arguments in defence of the Stage. Hitherto he has exhibited the Stage as a school of morals; we now behold it in a new character, the advocate of adultery and crime. But then, instead of an instructor it

* Mr. Wilberforce has written against the Stage, and the Quakers never visit the Theatre.

becomes a pupil, and it is to be taught by the audience. A few virtuous individuals are to assemble, for the express purpose of frowning this teacher of a pure morality into a sense of propriety. But let him speak for himself: "As there are some tragedies which soften down suicide, so there are some comedies which soften down adultery. Moliere's George Dandin is one, to look no nearer home. In Moliere's time, and in the unrefined nations, it had not yet been discovered in how high a degree domestic happiness and social order depend on conjugal fidelity. It was not yet notorious, that a husband will submit to no privations, and will undertake no labour, no hazard to provide for the children of a wife whom he has suspected. It was not yet notorious, that filial, as well as parental affection vanishes, where its object is uncertain or infamous. The son disdains at home, without scruple, the frown of a stranger, or the tears of a harlot: the daughter forsakes, in their old age, the one parent because he is not akin, and the other because she has not a character. It was not yet calculated how short-lived is the pleasure of gallantry; how long-lived its miserable and irrevocable effect. Beauty lasts but an olympiad, the constancy of a gallant but a summer; and for this summer, were it to be spent in the paradise of Mahomet, without fear, and without remorse, it would.

not be worth while to endanger, far less fling away, thirty or forty years of mutual confidence and friendship. This, where there are no children, and where there are, mothers, if such there be, who for a moment have meditated, to snap these ties asunder, how think you to buy again those endearing charities, and purest pleasures of your nature—that sympathy of family affection, forbidden for ever to the hearth polluted by the adulterer? The degradation of rank, the dissolution of acquaintance, are comparatively feeble considerations. Let the comic poet therefore be called to a severe responsibility, when he seems to dally with the holiest bonds, which hold our hearts together. Let the matron rise and quit the Playhouse, with her daughter, if her sacred presence is profaned by coarse ribaldry, or systematic licentiousness. Genius can be so taught, that unless he is the slave of virtue, he must become the outcast of fame; that no works of art endure, but those which advocate the enduring interests of mankind; and that the true road to permanent praise on earth is to merit the favour of a retributive Deity.”

From the close of this paragraph it appears that this writer is nearly as good a Christian as he is a reasoner. What shall we think of a school which requires so much caution in its pupils, and which endangers their social and domestic happiness?

Can a more powerful argument be brought against the Stage, than that it sometimes dallies with the holiest bonds; and that a combination of virtuous individuals is necessary to shame it by their reproaches into the bounds of decency? Is this writer aware, that the remedy he proposes will never be applied. Exemplary characters will not visit a Theatre to cry these comedies down; and genius has so long been taught, that to be successful on the Stage, he must be licentious, that he will not heed the frowns of a few virtuous individuals. And what virtuous matron would carry her daughter to a place where it was probable her sacred presence might be profaned by coarse ribaldry and systematic licentiousness. The regeneration of the Theatre has been attempted again and again. I have proved in my Essay that it cannot essentially be changed; that from the characters of those who support it, and the nature of its constitution, it must be evil: it has long been reasoned out of existence, and it can only be defended by degraded talents, and the most egregious sophistry.

But it is time for me to defend myself from the unjust censures which some assertions in the Essay have provoked. Assertions which are denominated the wildest, strangest, most untenable. It is very easy to string together a number of superlatives, and with a sweeping censure to

condemn; it is not so easy to reason, and to refute.

Let us consider what these assertions are, and fairly meet the charge of the critic. To him indeed they might appear wild, strange, and untenable; for he, no doubt, sat down to the volume, resolving that an enemy to the Stage should receive no mercy at his hands. But it sometimes happens, that when a critic would wound another he stabs himself; and this is particularly the case when victory, instead of truth, is the object of the contest.

With regard to the origin of the Stage, I have nothing new to advance; I am not ashamed again to declare, that the Theatre has ever owed its origin to religion. But I cannot possibly conceive how my admitting this can injure the side of the question which I have espoused. My Reviewer thinks the clergy acted wisely in making religion the subject of dramatic representation. This however is a singular opinion of his own, unsupported by any reasoning; but my opinion is directly the reverse of this; and notwithstanding his sagacious sneers, I am not ashamed to avow it; and were I called upon to defend that opinion, it would not lead me to advocate the cause of undisguised popery, and the shocking innovations with which it stript the Christian worship of its purity and simpli-

city: the other side of the question inevitably involves in it this consequence; and yet, judging from this Review, we must conclude that its writer is an infidel rather than a papist.

It is asserted, that the object of my second chapter is to inquire into the causes which have contributed to the success of the Stage, with a view to prove that civilization, advanced beyond its zenith, occasions this popularity. A reader of this Review, unacquainted with the Essay on the Stage, would certainly imagine that this was the leading, if not the only, design of the second chapter. However, this is only mentioned among a variety of other things, equally potent in contributing to the support and influence of the Theatre. But because it is mentioned, I am, it seems, liable to censure. The assertion is denied. Perhaps the figure which I employed to convey my meaning is liable to some exception. But what I intended by it is sufficiently obvious from a sentence which almost immediately follows; and when an author explains himself, advantage should not be taken of a single sentence, or mode of expression; his meaning should be obviously stated, and if erroneous, severely judged.

When I mentioned civilization, advanced beyond its zenith, as one cause of the success of the stage, the ground on which I stood must have been evident from the connexion. In the

very next page I asserted, "There is a certain point in civilization, beyond which it contributes not to a nation's prosperity or happiness; and that point is the utmost limit of refinement consistent with virtue. Now that point I considered as my zenith; and let me ask this Critic, had not Athens advanced far beyond it at the time of the rivalship of Sophocles and Euripides? And I imagine it will not for a moment be doubted that Rome was far, very far, on the decline when Ovid and Julius Cæsar assisted in translating Greek tragedies for the Roman stage. I asserted also in the very same page, in illustrating my meaning on this subject, that when the sinews of Roman and Athenian virtues were the strongest, the people had neither time nor inclination to regard the diversions of the Stage: and with regard to Rome, I quoted Horace to confirm my assertion:—see page 2 and 3. The whole passage I will here transcribe; and if my Critic pleases, he may enter the lists with the Roman satirist.

*Tibia non, ut nunc, orichalco vineta, tubæque
Æmula; sed tenuis, simplexque foramine pauco
Aspirare, et adesse choris erat utilis, atque
Nondum spissa nimis complere sedilia flatu;
Quò sanè populus numerabilis, utpote parvus,
Et frugi, castusque, verecuudusque coibat.
Postquam cœpit agros extendere victor; et urbem
Latior amplecti murus, vinoque diurno*

Placari Genius festis impunè diebus ;

Accessit numerisque modisque licentia major.

Horace ars Poetica.

Thus it appears, while the Roman community was small, while its members were frugal, chaste, and modest, the Theatre was little frequented—it was not a national interest. A slender rude pipe was all that was necessary to concur with the chorus, and to fill the rows which were not then too crowded. But afterwards, when conquest enlarged the Roman territory, when it poured into the city the profusions of luxury, and enervated the people; to gratify the sensual appetites without controul, became the disgraceful feature of their character who once were noble, simple, brave; the Theatre, the effeminate amusement which they once disdained, was made the favourite source of pleasure; and then it was found expedient to satisfy the voracious appetite of a luxurious people, to introduce into its music and poetry greater licentiousness.

In page 570 of the Review I am condemned for asserting “ That the Athenians and Romans were more virtuous before they had a Theatre;” and with an air of triumph the Critic asks, “ Can the gentleman name any Greek conspicuous for virtue who preceded Eschylus the tragedian? the Romans having had no archives until the year 450 after the foundation of the

city, nothing trust-worthy can be known of their earlier historical characters. In the year 568 they had long had a Theatre, because in that year separate seats were first allotted to the senate and the people. The story of Curius Dentatus proves a low state of public virtue; for it was then a matter of astonishment and admiration that a consul should refuse a bribe from the enemy's ambassador. In the time of Fabricius there was already a Theatre at Tarentum; whence, probably, after the peace with Pyrrhus, the institution came to Rome. Where then, unless in the single person of Fabricius, who, since he was invited to become the minister of Pyrrhus, must have been familiar with Greek language, and probably with the Greek drama, shall a fine specimen of Roman virtue be sought which preceded the establishment of the Stage? It rather seems as if the heroic delineations of the dramatic poet were the models which gave origin to public virtue."

The first question is, before I reply to this curious statement, have I any where asserted that the Athenians and Romans were more virtuous before they HAD a Theatre: the sixth page of the first edition of the Essay is referred to; but there I can only find the following observation:—"Among the Romans, for a series of years, the dramatic art was little cultivated. At the time

of its first introduction the rigid features of the old Roman character were strongly visible: but as these wore away, the Stage advanced with rapid progress, extended more widely its influence, and became, as at Athens, the fashionable resort of the idle, the dissolute, and the gay*.”

The next question is, What does the writer mean by the equivocal expression, “Had a Theatre, he ought to mean, and I imagine he does, a regular theatrical establishment, because it is impossible to argue on the influence of the Stage in those periods when it was without any peculiar character, and destitute of general interest; or when it was the popular amusement for a few days on extraordinary occasions. Taking this for granted, I shall defend the declaration made in the sixth page, which I have now quoted, and reply to the strange assertions and reasonings which it has produced.

As I have in the passage referred to asserted nothing respecting the Athenians, it is not necessary

* In the chapter on the estimation in which the Theatre was held by philosophers, legislators, and divines, I have quoted from Augustine the following remark; but this I only introduced to exhibit the opinion of Augustine on the subject of a Theatre. “Theatricas artes virtus Romana non noverat.” — For this I do not feel myself responsible, though if it be necessary I will undertake to prove its truth, which, I think, sufficiently done in this and a few subsequent pages.

for me to prove that they were more virtuous previous to the establishment of a Theatre among them; and it will be observed, that with regard to the Romans, I have only declared, that among them, for a series of years, the dramatic art was little cultivated, and that the cause of this was the rigid features of the old Roman character. And will this writer venture to affirm, that the Theatre had not to struggle with great opposition before it could gain at Rome a complete establishment? Is he not aware of the jealousy with which every thing Grecian was at first received among the Romans? Does he not know that the republican spirit, which was a spirit of industry, frugality, and independence, constantly opposed every thing luxurious, and that it therefore considered the Theatre a most dangerous enemy to Rome.

The Romans universally believed, that Greece destroyed her independence, and hurried herself into ruin by her rage for theatrical and other effeminate amusements; and therefore it was that Cato asserted, "That the establishment of a regular Theatre would be to Rome a more dangerous Carthage than that which they had just destroyed." As a reason for the subsequent progress of the Stage among the Romans, I remarked, that as the rigid features of the old Roman character wore away, the Stage advanced with proportionate rapidity. I did not call these

rigid features by the distinguished name of virtue. In a Christian sense, this would have been impossible. But had I considered the term in its common and Heathenish acceptation, I might have declared, that Rome was virtuous, and that her virtue was the most powerful obstacle to the influence of the Stage: and had I asserted this, the Critic, who dignifies anger and resentment with the name of virtue, could have no just reason to blame me.

What is usually understood by Roman virtue (and which was purity itself, when compared with the subsequent degeneracy of this once admirable people) flourished and decayed before the establishment of a Theatre: not till after the peace with Pyrrhus was any thing known at Rome of the Grecian, or any other Theatre. At the year 568, there was at Rome no regular theatrical establishment, whatever may be said of the allotment of separate seats to the senate and the people, in those temporary fabrics which were only reared to be in a few days demolished. The first dramatic poet of Rome, Livius Andronicus, lived about the year 514, U. C. that is, twenty-five years after the peace made with Pyrrhus. But even then the Stage was not established among the Romans. After the destruction of Carthage the policy of establishing a Theatre was questioned, and produced the re-

mark of Cato which I have before quoted, which fully proves, that in the year 621, from the foundation of the city, a Roman theatrical establishment was unknown. Pompey the Great, who flourished immediately before his successful rival and competitor for power, Julius Cæsar, was the first man who had power and credit enough to get a Theatre continued. Till his time it had to contend with insuperable difficulties. It was not a national interest; yet how many fine specimens of Roman virtue had appeared to delight, and to astonish mankind, long before the arrival of this æra. From the statement made in the Annual Review, the reader is led to conclude, that there was a theatrical establishment at Rome two centuries before such an establishment existed. The age of Fabricius also is stigmatized as being remarkably deficient in virtue, though in his own character he afforded the most striking specimen of public virtue upon record. But let any man read the pages of the Roman history which relate to that period, and I will venture to affirm, that so far from concluding that public virtue was at that time in a low state, he will be persuaded, that the age of Fabricius was singularly eminent in producing virtuous men:—indeed so powerfully did this impress the mind of Goldsmith, that after he has narrated the circumstances of the war with Pyrrhus, and brought it

to a close he ventures to pay this just tribute to Roman virtue.—“ In this manner ended the war with Pyrrhus, after six years continuance. Through the whole of this, we find the Romans acting a nobler part than in any former period; endeavouring to join the politeness of Greece to the virtuous austerity of their own manners. A spirit of frugality, contempt of wealth, and virtuous emulation, had spread itself over the whole senate. Fabricius not only brought poverty into fashion by his example, but punished all approaches to luxury by his authority as a magistrate. About this time, in the censorship of Fabricius, Ruffinùs, who had been twice a consul, and once a dictator, was turned out of the senate, and had a mark of infamy put upon his name, for no other offence than being possessed of ten pound of silver plate for the use of his table. By this love of temperance, and these successes in war, though the individuals were poor, the public was rich; the number of citizens was also increased to above two hundred thousand men capable of bearing arms; and the fame of the Roman name was so far extended, that Ptolemy Philadelphus, King of Egypt, sent ambassadors to congratulate their success, and to entreat their alliance.”

At this period it will be remembered, according to the Reviewer's own confession, a Theatre

was unknown at Rome. The institution was not carried thither till after the peace with Pyrrhus, and it was imported, he says, from Tarentum. It may not be wholly irrelevant to inquire what glorious effects the Stage produced among the Tarentines, who, according to this writer, were destined to the high honour of communicating to Rome this "Origin of public virtue?"

When Pyrrhus marched with an army to their defence, he found the Tarentines in a most deplorable condition. "Upon his arrival at Tarentum (remarks the historian) his first care was to reform the people he came to succour; for observing a total dissolution of manners in this luxurious city, and how the inhabitants were rather occupied with the pleasures of bathing, feasting, and dancing, than in preparing for war; HE GAVE ORDERS TO HAVE ALL THEIR PLACES OF PUBLIC ENTERTAINMENT SHUT UP." Yet with all this weight of evidence against him, with facts which every school-boy knows staring him in the face, with an effrontery peculiarly his own, this Reviewer asks, "Where then, unless in the single person of Fabricius, who, since he was invited to become the minister of Pyrrhus, must have been familiar with Greek language, and probably with the Greek drama, shall a fine specimen of Roman virtue be sought which pre-

ceeded the establishment of the Stage?" And after this he adds in a sort of triumph, "It rather seems as if the heroic delineations of the dramatic poet were the models, which gave origin to public virtue." On this last most curious discovery of the origin of public virtue, I would make a few observations. I would just remark, that these heroic delineations of the dramatic poet are those which were imported from Greece; from that Theatre which, by this writer, is denounced the most impudent of any upon record; and yet these impudent, these licentious delineations, "It rather seems," were the models which gave origin to public virtue. I confess I have a much higher opinion of the Athenian Stage before the reign of Aristophanes while it was supported and adorned by the talents and virtues of Euripides and Sophocles than this Reviewer: but even the productions of these best of tragedians I cannot consider as deserving the extravagant encomiums which are here passed without discrimination upon all the performances of the Grecian poets. Tragedy, this Reviewer asserts, is a lecture on history; that is, it is a heroic public spirited interesting delineation of human nature. Now if this definition be accurate, public virtue must have existed before it could be represented in the scenes of the drama. These delineations were not therefore the crea-

tures of the poets imagination, but they were exact representations of human nature, of some great and distinguished characters, who had lived and acted on the great stage of the world. They were rather mirrors than models; and "It rather seems," from the testimony of history and experience, that these theatrical representations led the people to substitute admiration of virtue for virtue itself, and to waste that time in beholding a mere exhibition of the virtues of others, which they should have employed in acquiring excellences of their own, till a habit of idleness was induced, which laid them open to the artful designs of the comic poets, who gradually undermined their virtue, and made them slaves of licentiousness and folly. How otherwise are we to account for the unbounded influence of Aristophanes, who almost, in their own age, chased the great tragedians from the Stage. This only proves, that a theatre is, in every view, a most dangerous establishment. Its very tendency to produce idleness in its best state was the seed of its degeneracy, and renders it an evil of awful magnitude. I think I may venture to affirm, that after the time the Stage became a general interest there is no striking instance of Athenian virtue; and yet if it were the model which gave origin to public virtue, the more general its influence, the more virtue ought to

abound among the people. And Rome was rapidly on the decline when Pompey reared the Theatre which bore his name; nor could this important establishment arrest the progress of effeminacy and vice; but on the contrary, it accelerated the fall of the mistress of the world.

I now proceed to mention another instance of unjust censure on sentiments advanced in the Essay. I am accused, page 570, of asserting, "That nations become enervated, emasculated, effeminate, and cowardly, by affording countenance to the Stage," and in this I am contradicted. It should, however, be recollected, that I had, in a preceding chapter placed wealth, luxury, and idleness among the causes of the success of the drama. These I considered as tending to make a people effeminate, and thus to prepare them for the amusements of the Stage: and having been thus produced by luxury, idleness, and dissipation, it was but natural that the Theatre should bear the features of its parents, and contribute to spread their influence. To this reasoning, which is supported by facts the most striking in history, the Critic replies, "It suffices to oppose the instance of the modern French, who are the least enervated of the civilized nations, and the most regardful of the pleasures of the Theatre." Then

follows a learned disquisition on the causes of effeminacy, in which the writer very ingeniously contrives to aim a blow at the Puritanic Methodists of the modern world.

There are (he observes) physical, and there are moral causes of effeminacy. He asserts, on the physical causes of effeminacy, the Stage has little effect: and its moral causes, he affirms, are chiefly to be sought in the opinions of certain teachers, who advise that men should be enured to all the virtues of women; that they should subdue anger and resentment; that they should cultivate patience and content. Now as courage is much connected with anger and with activity, it will generally be found, that the moral principles which attack these qualities will, in proportion as they prevail, diminish the mass of national bravery. In the ancient world, principles of this kind were propagated by the Alexandrian Platonists, and their disciples, in alliance with an unintelligible mysticism: and in the modern world, principles of this kind are propagated by the Puritanic Methodists; in both cases with the obvious effect of diffusing a gentle humane unresisting temper, running over with benevolence, empty of courage. In replying to this morceau of criticism and argument, I beg leave first to quote the passage from the Essay, in

which it is declared, that the assertion here combated is made*. “The Roman empire was rapidly on the decline when Nero himself became a buffoon and a comedian, and while the Grecians were relaxing the nerves of their strength by these effeminate amusements, for which their luxury and idleness gave them a taste, they were gradually unfolding the gates of their city to Philip of Macedon.” Now if this statement agree with the truth: if by luxury and idleness the people were led to the Theatre as a principal source of gratification; and if the theatre operated as a powerful instrument in spreading effeminacy, and all its train of national evils, both at Greece and Rome, I am not persuaded, that an assertion founded on fact, and which is most legibly inscribed on the annals of their history ought to be retracted: nor do I believe that the instance of the modern French has any weight in the argument. May I be permitted to ask this writer what were the moral causes which led to the subjugation of Greece? and what was it that tended more than any thing besides to increase their influence? I refer him and the reader to that section in the Preface of Rollin’s Ancient History, entitled, “Passion for the re-

* Page 18, second edition.

presensations of the Theatre one of the principal causes of the degeneracy and corruption of the Athenian state." I imagine the reasoning and the facts there stated will even shock the confidence of an Annual Reviewer; and he will find that I was not mistaken, when I solemnly and unblushingly cried out, "Standing on the base of truth, I point to the column of history." As some stress is laid on the instance of the modern French, to prove that a passion for the Theatre does not emasculate and render a people effeminate, though perhaps by some it may be considered as unnecessary, I will yet make some remarks on the subject. And I observe, that the circumstances of the modern French are very different from those of Greece and Rome when the Theatre contributed so awfully to their degeneracy and ruin. The military spirit, and the constant dangers to which France has been exposed, have operated as a most powerful check upon the Stage. It has not yet made them cowards; they have had no leisure to be idle. But the Theatre has not been entirely without a pernicious influence even in France. The rulers, during the revolution, were skilful adepts in the art of corruption; they knew that it was necessary to corrupt before they could enslave: they therefore opened an unexampled number

of Theatres, and so reduced the price of admission as almost to emulate the gratuitous admission of the Athenian populace in the time of Pericles; and while their fellow citizens were dragged by hundreds to the guillotine, they could behold the horrors of the scene with stupid insensibility, and leave the spectacle of blood to be convulsed with laughter by the fictitious exhibitions of pantomimical buffoons. And is it no evidence of effeminacy and cowardice, when a people, who, but a few years before, made the most noble struggles for liberty, now tamely submit to the absolute yoke of a proud usurper. Let tranquility once more visit the continent of Europe: let Buonaparte and his legions return to enjoy the luxuries of the capital; with the spoils of conquered nations let them sit down to gratify their taste, and study the arts of refinement, and in a very few years the Theatre of France will complete what all Europe has combined its forces to accomplish in vain. A war of extermination commenced against France, roused her from that stupor which threatened death; healed those civil discords which seemed to hasten its approach; broke the charm of those effeminate amusements which allured her to destruction, and roused a military spirit which has produced an army in

the heart of Europe, which has hurled down the thrones on the continent, and which may, ere long, disorganize and destroy the political systems of the whole civilized world. By this combination to ruin them, the effeminacy of the French people received a mighty check. But if ever amusement and frivolity again become their business, (and luxury and peace will have a tendency to hasten the event) France will fall from her mighty eminence, and tremble in her turn at the puny nations she now laughs to scorn. It is therefore strikingly evident, that the instance of the modern French has no weight in the argument, against the effeminate influence of the Theatre, but in some respects furnishes a proof that the Stage does produce effeminacy, and is a sort of silken lining to the yoke of slavery, or rather a sweet ingredient which renders the bitter draught less unpalatable.

The manner in which this advocate of the Stage dismisses the subject in dispute, and under the moral causes of effeminacy, levels an attack upon Christianity, is almost too contemptible to deserve regard. That it is Christianity he reprobates, and not the Puritanic Methodists, is evident. The peculiarities of Methodism, whatever they may be, he has not noticed, but the lessons taught most expressly and unequivocally by

Jesus Christ himself, he has ridiculed and condemned. The glorious Teacher and Founder of our religion advised that men should be enured to what are here contemptuously called the virtues of women, and enjoined that they should subdue anger and resentment; that they should cultivate patience and content. The Christian Lawgiver really, and the Puritanic Methodists ostensibly, are censured for those moral qualities, which more than any thing besides distinguish the Gospel from every mere human system. And he who said "Avenge not yourselves," who commanded "Love your enemies," and who prayed for his murderers—"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," is represented as an enemy to mankind, the mischievous tendency of whose doctrines must diminish the mass of national bravery; and his faithful followers who imbibe the spirit of his religion, and act under its powerful influence, are stigmatized as "Puritanic Methodists." But Christianity smiles at the censures of a man whose diminutive greatness is composed of anger, resentment, and courage, who can only be brave when he is angry, and active when his lips quiver with revenge; in whose vocabulary self-denial is asceticism, magnanimity folly, Christian benevolence weakness, patience and contentment the virtue

of women. This advocate of the Stage, when he discloses the moral principles of his heart, proves with resistless evidence its antichristian tendency, and he is too much of a theatrical fanatic, properly to estimate the value of the Christian character.

What is courage when it is a passion instead of a principle, when it cannot exist but in the company of anger and resentment, and what are all the active virtues without the passive graces of Christianity. Christianity, and Christianity alone can perfect the human character, and there is no virtue of Christianity, which can be injurious to the general or individual interests of mankind. Does the Gospel make men inactive and effeminate, because it teaches them to deny ungodliness, and worldly lusts, and must it therefore be an enemy to human kind? To decide upon the value and importance of the moral principles of the Christian religion, it is only necessary that we should view the character of its great and glorious author. Without anger, without resentment, with "All the virtues of women," he was actively benevolent, he constantly went about doing good; benevolence, not anger, not resentment inspired him with courage; but then it was a harmless courage, by it he coolly and deliberately exposed himself to the most imminent perils, but he

injured not a human being. His courage bore upon it the marks of real greatness. He contended with the vices, the prejudices, and opinions of men; and he bestowed blessings upon them in spite of themselves. And when his activity and zeal involved him in danger, exposed him to the malice of wicked men, he exhibited something more noble than anger, more dignified than revenge. Rousseau a more ingenuous unbeliever than this cowardly critic while he openly declared that he could not believe the Gospel, avowed that "The death of Jesus was the death of a God;" he contemplated it with admiration, and joined the centurion in his testimony, "Verily this is the Son of God." If the virtues, which Jesus displayed on the cross, and which he exhibited in various trying situations during his life, are the virtues of women, women deserve our homage, and we need not wonder that they captivate all hearts; but I believe there will be found in this concession to the fair sex more gallantry than good sense. This would be a happy world if both sexes were emulous to excel in these god-like virtues; it is not for a human imagination to conceive a scene of more perfect bliss than a community wholly Christian in which every heart overflows with benevolence, every individual is actually and constantly employed in the cause of.

goodness, and all esteeming others better than themselves. A community where anger and resentment are unknown, and where the unity of the Spirit is maintained in the bond of peace. Let the world look on such a scene till it resembles what it views.

But it seems, these are the moral principles which are propagated by the Puritanic Methodists. Glorious distinction! Christianity has not then in anger forsaken this ungrateful world; despised puritanic methodists, happy for mankind she has taken up her abode with you! Go on then with a noble courage, disseminate the principles which the Son of God came down from heaven to exemplify, and in defence of which he bled and died. But why; let me ask, are all real Christians, who are consistent enough to believe that the New Testament is an infallible standard of Christian doctrine and practice, and who, therefore, bow to its decision and conform to its injunctions, why are all such to be stigmatized with opprobrious epithets? and why did not this enemy of the Gospel of Christ, boldly avow his infidelity? why should he shield himself in an attack on the vitals of Christianity, by insinuating that he only levelled his malice against a sect, who, for whatever reason, are despised and laughed at by the world? To answer these questions would lead me

into a wide field of discussion; the conscience of the Reviewer, and all who imitate him, can best account for this strange injustice.

In this age of abounding infidelity, I confess I am a little surprised that a writer, who is evidently a despiser of the Christian religion should be ashamed to avow it, but when I remember that some courage even now is necessary to enable a man unblushingly to withstand the reproaches of conscience, and the indignation of the good and wise, and that this critic can only be courageous when he is angry, my surprize yields to pity that a man should love a cause which he is afraid openly to espouse, and that his courage should fail him at the moment, and on an occasion when the want of it must brand him with the meanness of cowardice, and expose the cause he would thus sneakingly serve to contempt. We may indeed make for him this excuse, that he perhaps imagined by this mode of procedure, more effectually and with little expense of intellectual labour to give a deadly thrust at the religion of Jesus. It probably occurred to him that stigmatizing doctrines and principles with the odious name of Methodism was a certain and short way of covering them with infamy: that he could laugh at a Methodist with much more ease and with much less danger than he could invalidate

the truth and excellence of Christianity; and why should a man waste his time and his efforts by a long course of tedious reasonings when one word will produce all the desired effect. Here I cannot refrain quoting an appropriate passage from Foster's Essays. "Whenever a grave formalist feels it his duty to sneer at those operations of religion on the passions which he has never felt, he has only to call them methodistical; and notwithstanding that the word is both so trite and so vague, he feels as if he had uttered a good pungent thing. There is a satiric smartness in the word, though there be none in the man. In default of keen faculty in the mind, it is delightful thus to find something that will do as well ready bottled up in odd terms. It is not less convenient to a profligate, or a coxcomb, whose propriety of character is to be supported by laughing indiscriminately at religion in every form; the one to evince that his courage is not sapped by conscience, the other to make the best advantage of his instinct of catching at impiety as a substitute for sense. The word methodism so readily sets aside all religion as superstitious folly, that they pronounce it with an air as if no more needed to be said. Such terms have a pleasant facility of throwing the matter in question to scorn without any trouble

of making a definite, intelligible charge of extravagance or delusion, and attempting to prove it."

Before I dismiss the subject of religion, I will notice the remarks which the chapter on the anti-christian tendency of the Stage has produced from the Reviewer.

"Here comes out the secret cause of our author's antipathy to the Theatre, it retards forsooth the progress of a fanatical sect. Observe what sort of beings grow up under their mischievous discipline. The men are spiritless and cunning; the women want the amenity of benevolence, all are austere, anxious, shy, melancholy, speaking with a slothful whine, and with few radiations of intelligence. Without being aware of the blasphemous impiety and more than atheistic profaneness of such an opinion, they think and teach of God as if he had a dislike to the happiness of his creatures. Pitiable mistakers of the eternal interest which you affect to have at heart; O learn while it is yet time that to enjoy is to obey, and that habitually to diffuse happiness is alone to deserve perpetual existence." After this raving, this phrensy, I would give the advice of Damasippus to my disordered Critic.

"Naviget Anticyram."—————

To assert the paramount claims of the Christian

lawgiver, to exhibit Christianity as its features are pourtrayed in the New Testament, is, in the estimation of this Reviewer, to advocate the cause of a sect, and of a sect whose tenets according to his representation are the most forbidding, from which the heart revolts, and which are as repugnant to my feelings, as unsophisticated Christianity is to the feelings of my opponent. In the chapter on the antichristian tendency of the Stage, I have only maintained the morality of the Gospel; I have not even proposed what are called its dogmas, I have confined myself to its practical tendency, and to a display of those virtues which are cordially embraced by almost all the various sects and parties into which the Christian world is divided. I have asserted that the morality of the Stage has always been a morality diametrically opposite to that of the Gospel, and this I have proved from the New Testament, and from a view of the popular theatrical virtues. No ingenuity could discover from what I had written, that I was the advocate of any sect: mine is the sectarianism of Christianity, and my fanaticism, conviction from irresistible evidence that the Gospel is divine, and that it demands the homage of the heart. If a fair estimate could be made, I believe it would be found that my opponent is the greater

fanatic. He presumes where he ought to tremble, he talks of perpetual existence, while he speaks contemptuously of the only revelation which brings immortality to light. He calls Christian virtues, the virtues of women, and represents the New Testament as forming a character misanthropic, and spiritless, a character without benevolence, and without enjoyment; he ranges himself with the enemies of Christianity, and would enter into the presence of the eternal Judge, would plunge into a world of everlasting retribution with a lie in his right hand. I have always considered the sect of unbelievers as the most fanatical and the most misanthropic. If fanaticism be a substitute for reason, and an enemy to it, these are the men who are under its shocking influence. Evidence as clear as the noon-day sun their passions will not allow them to discern, and claims of an immortal interest are superceded by the vanities of the passing hour. And where can there be found in the coldest human bosom misanthropy more forbidding than that which, under the pretence of philosophy, teaches us to renounce all future hope, and robs us of our guide and charter for eternity. And what are all the enjoyments of this mischievous sect, "To enjoy (say they) is to obey," to gratify their passions and their depraved desires;

to listen to every claim of folly, and not to starve a single wish, which rises in the bosom, however vicious; this they call enjoyment, and thus to enjoy is to obey. How much more refined, exalted, and durable the happiness of a sincere Christian. He knows it is decreed, by the ruler of man, that the present should be a state of discipline: he feels that he has passions which he must regulate; temptations which he must resist; depravity which he must subdue. He believes that our infinitely kind Benefactor has blended duty and enjoyment together; that he has forbidden only what would injure, and enjoined what would make us happy, and he reverses the infidel maxim. He is persuaded that to obey is to enjoy. Who then is the mistaker of the immortal interest of the imperishable soul? The Christian or the unbeliever,—the friend of the Gospel, or its adversary. Under your mischievous discipline ye apostles of infidelity, men grow up enemies of God, and enemies to their species. Your writings diffuse misery, whenever they misrepresent religion, or traduce the characters of its friends, I at least am able flatly to contradict and to expose the violations of truth contained in the description of those, who, it is said, grow up under the mischievous discipline of the sect to which I belong.

We are neither destitute of spirit nor courage; we dare avow our sentiments in the face of an opposing world; we dare to repel the attacks of insolence, and to chastize the temerity of ignorance; we also can be benevolent, we can pity a Reviewer when he laughs at religion, and while we detest the crime, we can pardon the criminal, and give him a brother's interest in our hearts.

The last thing which I shall notice in this extraordinary Critique is the arrogant style in which the Reviewer calls upon me to retract an assertion which is to be found in the 24th. page of the Essay, namely, "That a Theatre much more pure than any which modern Europe ever knew ~~was~~ established at ancient Athens." But if I can fix on any period when this was the case, my point is established and in my turn I may call upon the Reviewer to retract his arrogant and unfounded censures, and to acknowledge that at least he is quite as ignorant as the Author of the Essay on the Stage. If we look at the Theatre of Greece in its first rise to eminence, and during the most splendid period of its history from the time of Eschylus to the commencement of the dramatic reign of Aristophanes, we shall be struck with its purity and its dignity, and in vain shall we search in the modern world and in Chris-

tian countries for a Theatre which inculcates a morality so unexceptionable, so free from impiety and licentiousness. That the Grecian Stage soon and rapidly degenerated, only adds weight to the arguments which are advanced against the Theatre. It is sufficient for my purpose to prove that the Grecian Stage, though not entirely immaculate, was much more pure than any which has appeared in modern Europe. And there was a period in the Athenian history, when however the poets were disposed, the audience would not endure the most distant approaches to profaneness, obscenity, and vice. "One cannot (says Rollin,) sufficiently admire the extreme delicacy expressed by the Athenian audience on certain occasions, and their solicitude to preserve the reverence due to morality, virtue, decency, and justice. It is surprising to observe the warmth with which they unanimously reprov'd whatever seemed inconsistent with them, and called the poet to an account for it, notwithstanding his having the best-founded excuse in giving such sentiments only to persons notoriously vicious, and actuated by the most unjust passions." And it was not till the very lowest of the people were gratuitously admitted to the enjoyment of theatrical exhibitions, that the comic poet dared to indulge in low buffoonery

and gross obscenity. Horace indeed expressly declares, that the ancient comedy was subsequent to the time of Eschylus*; and if the public mind at that time was so tenacious, so delicately alive to a sense of propriety, and so disposed to reprobate every thing that had the least appearance of immorality, some interval must have taken place before that taste could have been so shockingly depraved, as to banish a company of comedians because their scenes were not grossly comic enough.

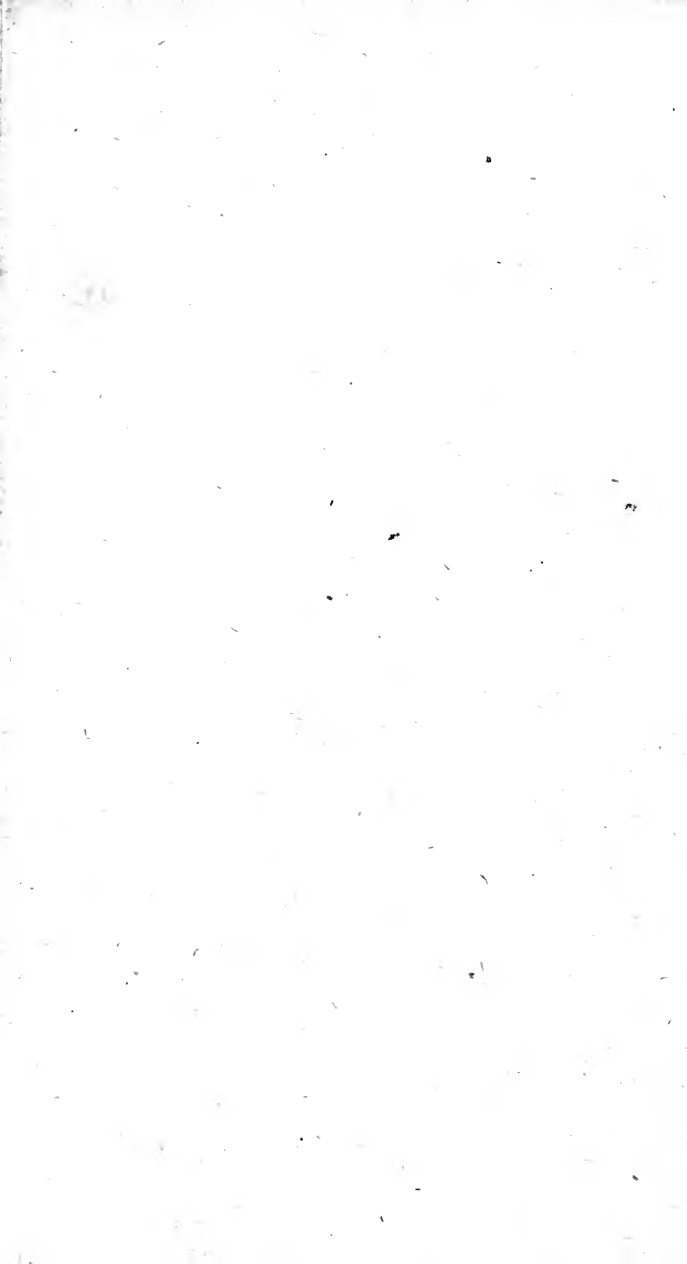
But that the taste of the people did thus degenerate, that the great tragic poets could not retain their influence, and exclude impure and disgusting comedy from the Grecian Theatre is a strong and irresistible proof, that the best regulated Stage is a very unsafe, uncertain, and inefficient school, both of morality and happiness.

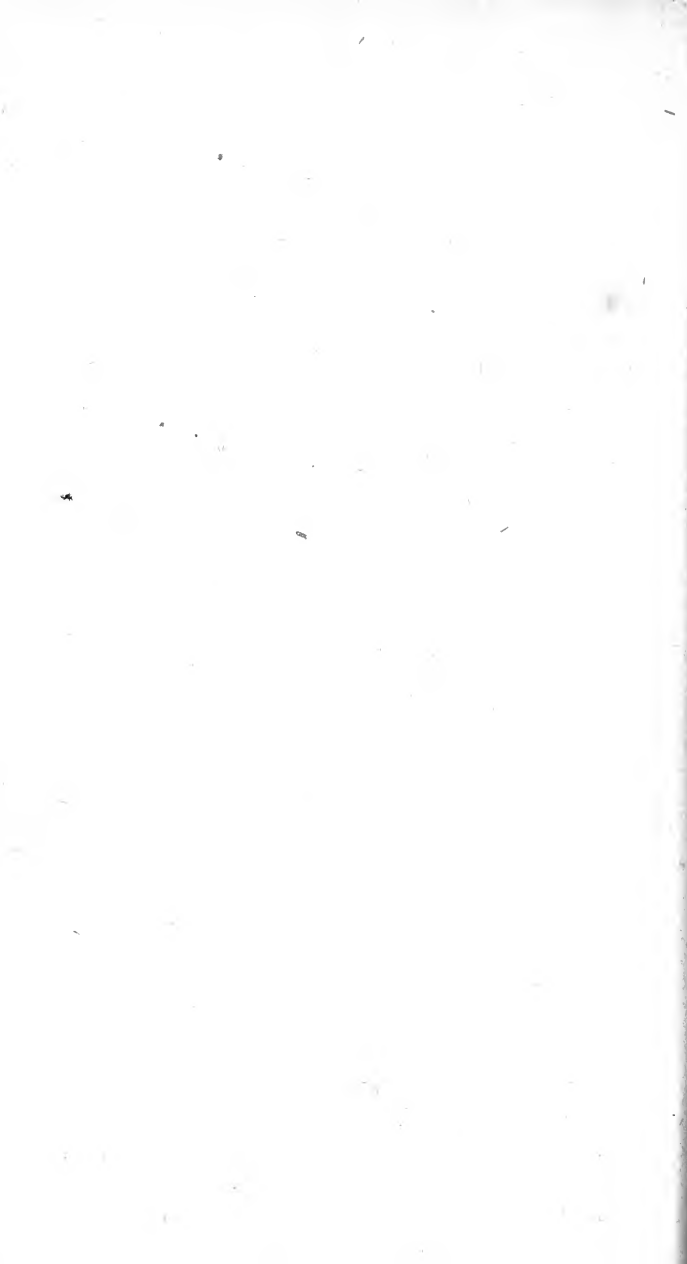
Having now established what I intended, having proved that with splendid, and even imposing talents this annual Reviewer is strangely unqualified to fill the chair of criticism, and having shewn how little its warmest advocates can produce in favour of the Stage. I now conclude intreating my Critic to review his own performance, to retract his false assertions, to blush at his palpable contradictions, and to weep

* *Successit vetus his comædia non sua multa laude.*

with the bitter tears of repentance over that impiety which would wrest from the Christian his consolations and his hopes, and shroud the world in moral darkness.

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